

# Crisis and the Power of an Inclusive Historical Consciousness: Progressing from Delusional Habits to Dynamic Freedom<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

In view of the many crises now facing humanity—such as the coronavirus pandemic, overt racial strife, environmental

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degradation, and political turmoil and extremism—this essay has two objectives. The first objective, addressed in Part One, is diagnostic. Specifically, it is to examine two macro habits of mind that are described as delusional because, while they may seem warranted, they in fact perpetuate defects of being, doing, and associating that, in turn, exacerbate the crises before us. These two habits of mind, namely, the habit of totalizing reality and the habit of fragmenting reality, manifest in various harmful ways, including in our compulsions to ideologize, to dichotomize, to reduce, to individualize, to hyper-consume, to dogmatize, and to otherize. The second objective, addressed in Part Two, is to propose how these delusional macro habits of mind and their associated compulsions can be overcome. It is argued that overcoming them entails embracing an inclusive historical consciousness, centered on the idea of humanity's path to maturity, and developing the related capacities to think and act in accordance with a number of dynamic interplays, including the interplays between unity and diversity, the individual and the collective, and worship and service. Finally, it is maintained that learning to think and act in accordance with these interplays promotes what is called dynamic freedom—a condition in which the wealth of individual and collective potential is progressively realized for the benefit of all. It is hoped that this article will be of some assistance to readers' efforts to contribute to the advancement of the discourses in which they are involved, by helping them correlate the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith with the ideas of thoughtful individuals from the larger community who are alert to the consequences of totalizing and fragmenting reality.

*Résumé*

Dans le contexte des nombreuses crises auxquelles l'humanité est confrontée aujourd'hui, telles que la pandémie de coronavirus, les conflits raciaux manifestes, la dégradation de l'environnement ainsi que l'instabilité et l'extrémisme politiques, l'auteur du présent essai poursuit deux objectifs. Le premier objectif, qu'il aborde dans la première partie, est de poser un diagnostic. Plus précisément, il s'agit d'examiner deux grandes façons de pensée que l'auteur qualifie d'illusoire car, même si elles peuvent sembler justifiées, elles perpétuent en réalité des défaillances en matière d'être, d'action et d'association. Ces défaillances, à leur tour, exacerbent les crises auxquelles l'humanité est confrontée. Ces deux grandes tendances à appréhender la réalité selon une vision totalisante ou morcelante se manifestent de diverses manières préjudiciables, notamment dans notre compulsion à nous cantonner dans des idéologies, des dichotomies, le réductionnisme, l'individualisme, l'hyperconsommation, le dogmatisme ainsi qu'à voir le monde en termes de « nous » et « eux ». Le deuxième objectif, que l'auteur aborde dans la deuxième partie, consiste à proposer des moyens pour surmonter ces deux grandes façons de pensée et les compulsions qui s'y rattachent. L'auteur soutient que pour s'en affranchir, il faut adopter une conscience inclusive de l'histoire, centrée sur l'idée du cheminement de l'humanité vers la maturité, et développer les capacités connexes de penser et d'agir en fonction d'un certain nombre d'interactions dynamiques, notamment les interactions entre l'unité et la diversité, l'individu et le collectif, l'adoration et le service. Enfin, l'auteur soutient que le fait d'apprendre à penser et à agir en fonction de ces interactions favoriserait ce qu'il appelle la liberté

dynamique, une condition qui permettrait au riche potentiel individuel et collectif d'être progressivement réalisé au profit de tous. L'auteur souhaite que cet article aide les lecteurs à contribuer à l'avancement des discours publics auxquels ils participent, en les aidant à mettre en corrélation les enseignements de la foi bahá'íe avec les idées de personnes réfléchies dans la société qui sont conscientes des conséquences qu'entraînent des visions totalisantes ou fragmentaires de la réalité.

*Resumen*

Este ensayo tiene dos objetivos en vista de las crisis múltiples que enfrenta la humanidad actualmente- tal como la pandemia del Coronavirus, el conflicto racial abierto, el deterioro ambiental, al igual que la agitación y el extremismo político. El primer objetivo tiene un propósito diagnóstico y se aborda en la Parte 1. Específicamente, su propósito es examinar dos macro hábitos mentales que se describen como ilusorios porque, aunque parezcan justificados, de hecho, perpetúan defectos del ser y el actuar, y eso a su vez, complica la crisis que enfrentamos. Estos dos hábitos mentales, específicamente el hábito de totalizar a la realidad y el hábito de fragmentarla, se manifiestan de varias maneras dañinas, incluso en nuestras compulsiones por ideologizar, dicotomizar, reducir, individualizar, híper consumir, dogmatizar y enajenar a los demás. El segundo objetivo, abordado en la Parte 2, es proponer como estos macro hábitos mentales ilusorios y sus compulsiones asociadas, pueden ser sobrepasadas. Demostraremos que el sobrepasarlas conlleva aceptar una conciencia histórica inclusiva, centrada en la idea del sendero hacia la madurez de la humanidad, y en el desarrollo de las capacidades relacionadas del pensar y el actuar, de acuerdo a una cantidad

de interrelaciones dinámicas, incluyendo a las interrelaciones entre la unidad y la diversidad, el individuo y el conjunto, y entre la adoración y el servicio. Finalmente, se afirma que el aprender a pensar y actuar de acuerdo con estas interrelaciones promueve lo que llamamos la libertad dinámica—una condición en la cual la riqueza del potencial del individuo y del colectivo se logra progresivamente para el beneficio de todos. Se espera que este artículo sea de ayuda en los esfuerzos de los leyentes para contribuir hacia el avance de los discursos en los cuales están involucrados, ayudándolos a correlacionar las enseñanzas de la fé bahá'í con las ideas de individuos reflexivos de la comunidad en general quienes están alertas a las consecuencias de la fragmentación y la totalización de la realidad.

## PART ONE: DELUSIONAL HABITS

Humanity appears to be living through an extraordinarily challenging moment in history. We are currently beset by a pandemic that is “creating tragedies for families and individuals and plunging whole societies into crisis” (Universal House of Justice, Riḍvân 2020). This crisis is compounded by the fact that much of the suffering appears needless, its having been exacerbated, particularly in some countries, by the lack of a unified, science-based approach to grappling with the disease. As stated by the Universal House of Justice: “Seldom has it been more evident that society’s collective strength is dependent on the unity it can manifest in action, from the international stage to the grassroots” (Naw-Rúz 177). The

resulting consternation has also been aggravated by a host of other dilemmas that have put many into a state of existential dismay. These dilemmas include the rise of demagoguery and the persistent challenge to democracy, including its institutions, the balance of power, and the integrity of the franchise; the blatant debasement of political and moral norms; the shifting dynamics of power between nations partly accomplished through duplicitous means notably involving social and news media; the palpable worsening state of the environment; and the distressing resurgence, yet again, of overt racial animosity and acts of hate coupled with political extremism, uprisings, and violence. In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “the tempests of trials and tribulations have encompassed the world, and fear and trembling have agitated the planet” (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, Naw-Rúz 177).

## OVERVIEW: TWO OBJECTIVES

Recognizing that change is endemic to society—for better or for worse, and particularly during this age of transition<sup>2</sup>—it is with tribulations such as these in mind that this essay has been written. It has two objectives, which are addressed in two parts.

The first objective, addressed in this part, is to critically examine two overarching *delusional habits of mind*,

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2 That is, “as humanity struggles to attain its collective maturity” (Universal House of Justice, 28 Dec. 2010).

which are labeled as delusional because, while they may seem justified and natural, they in fact operate in various ways to perpetuate numerous *defects of being, doing, and associating*, and thereby stifle our capacity to deal with crisis, let alone flourish, as a global community. These defects, discussed at the outset of this essay, are referred to as distress, dissension, degradation, disenchantment, displacement, and despair. The delusional habits that perpetuate these defects are, first, the *macro habit of totalizing reality* (with related terms being the *totalistic mindset* and *totalism*<sup>3</sup>), and, second, the *macro habit of fragmenting reality* (the *fragmented mindset* and *fragmentism*<sup>4</sup>). Tied

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3 The term “totalism” is typically associated with systems of government such as authoritarianism, absolutism, and totalitarianism. It also refers to the cluster of strategies used by certain groups to control the thought and behavior of their members (see, for example, Lifton). As outlined below, the habit of totalizing reality refers in this essay to the proclivity to encapsulate as much of reality as possible within a particular worldview and to repudiate as irrelevant, senseless, or antagonistic all that does not align with it. Totalism refers to the cognitive and/or social condition in which the habit of totalizing reality predominates. It can also refer to the view or philosophy that it is normal, natural, or desirable for this condition to predominate. Totalitarianism and thought control are types of totalism as the term is employed here.

4 The term “fragmentalism” could have been chosen instead; however, while there are similarities between “fragmentalism” and “fragmentism”, the former is used

to the first macro habit of mind is the compulsion to ideologize. Tied to the second one are the compulsions to reduce, compartmentalize, and dichotomize, to atomize or individualize, and to hyper-consume, among others. Tied to both macro habits are the compulsions to dogmatize, distort, and fictionalize, and to otherize and tribalize. Each of these compulsions can also be described as habits, such as the habit of ideologizing, of reducing, of hyper-consuming, and so on.

The second objective, addressed in Part Two of this essay, is constructive. It is to propose that in order to transcend these delusional habits of mind, what is required is a wholehearted embrace of an *inclusive historical, or narrative, consciousness* which both informs, and is enriched by, a diversity of micro narratives, and which is vitalized by our capacities to think and act in accordance with a number of fundamental *interplays*. These include the interplays between unity and diversity, the individual and the collective, worship and service, tribulation and progress, moment and time, consistency and flexibility, material reality and spiritual reality, quality and quantity, truth and relativity, subjectivity and objectivity, and science and religion,

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by Kit Fine to explain his novel approach to the philosophy of time. As discussed below, fragmentism, in this essay, refers to the cognitive and/or social condition in which the habit of fragmenting reality predominates. It can also refer to the view or philosophy that it is normal, natural, or desirable for this condition to predominate.

among others. It is further suggested that the capacities to think and act in line with such interplays give rise to a new form of freedom referred to here as *dynamic freedom*. To make this point, particular focus is placed on the first three interplays.

While this essay may be of interest to a more general audience, it is aimed primarily at individuals who are concerned with correlating, where possible, the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith with the ideas of thoughtful minds from the larger community. It is hoped that some of the insights and the language herein will be of some assistance in advancing various discourses that are relevant to their areas of study and focus.

#### DEFECTS OF BEING, DOING, AND ASSOCIATING

There is much evidence to suggest that humanity has made notable progress over the last couple of centuries in terms of material wellbeing and human rights. Steven Pinker, for example, makes the case that, especially since the inauguration of the Age of Reason, we have advanced significantly in reducing the prevalence of poverty, disease, violence, and war. Hans Rosling et al. offer a similar assessment, maintaining that the common refrain that the world has gotten worse is belied by actual facts, which indicate that we are better off today than we have ever been in terms of healthcare, education, and reduction in poverty. In the same vein, Johan Norberg contends that

now, more than at any other time in our history, we are enjoying greater overall wealth, literacy, equality, and food quality, among other factors related to our welfare.

Equally evidential in this regard is the process of global integration itself. This integration is being facilitated by radical developments in technology but is also, notably, being impelled by crises that transcend national boundaries. For many (but certainly not everyone) around the world, the coronavirus pandemic, arguably the greatest calamity humanity has faced since World War II, is helping to disclose the reality that humanity is one and that it needs to act as such. The House of Justice assures us that “humanity will ultimately pass through this ordeal, and it will emerge on the other side with greater insight and with a deeper appreciation of its inherent oneness and interdependence” (Naw-Rúz 177). Longstanding crises such as the worsening state of the environment and the recent trenchant challenges caused by mass migration are highlighting the same fundamental truth.<sup>5</sup>

One could also argue that, overall, there have been significant advances in equality and civil rights over, say, the last one hundred years. There is unquestionably a long way to go as

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5 In a similar vein, Jeffrey Sachs makes a compelling case for coming to terms with our technologically driven globalization and the need for governance at the international level that can effectively guide humanity through its crises and achieve sustainable development.

highlighted, for example, by the #Me-Too movement and the recent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, among others, as well as the recent shooting of Jacob Blake. Yet, even here, progress can be observed when one considers how consciousness has expanded as demonstrated by the growing diversity of people across different nations who feel compelled to raise their voices to combat the forces of systemic discrimination. At the time of writing this essay, there is a mounting sense that because of such crises, we might be approaching an inflection point, one that has the possibility of giving birth to much-needed change in the name of social justice. Certainly, the political will to abolish racism once and for all appears to be growing, at least in some quarters.

Yet, simultaneous with the process of integration is the irrepressible process of disintegration.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, a faithful reading of reality would seem to expose numerous indicators of rampant societal decay, some of which have been highlighted by many authors across a range of traditions—from at least Jean-Jacques Rousseau onwards—who maintain that society has become degenerate and sick. The Dalai Lama, for example, draws attention to how the fundamental interdependence of all things has been obscured by commodity fetishism, which can only

be overcome through compassion. Eric Fromm argues that we are caught up in a cycle of anxiety, loneliness, unfulfillment, and depression because we have fallen into a “having” mode rather than a “being” mode, owing to a consumerist culture that compels us to compete, compare, and value greed and accumulation at the expense of sharing and solidarity. Mohandas Gandhi maintains that liberalism has subverted the very human dignity it claims to uphold, and he advocates in its stead a supernatural life of self-mastery characterized, among other things, by austerity and continuous non-violent struggle to liberate others from suffering. John Lamé Deer teaches that modernity is permeated with the wrong symbols (most predominantly the square), which signify separation from rather than harmony with nature (symbolized instead by the circle). Similarly, Leo Tolstoy laments the loss of premodern spiritual values; for him, life in secular society is meaningless and superficial, discourages us from truly considering our existential situation, and seduces us into living lives of triviality, the reality of which only becomes apparent to us when we face our own death.

#### SIX INTERRELATED DEFECTS

There are a number of ways to describe the phenomenon of disintegration that society faces, particularly (but not exclusively) in the West. One way is to expand upon Shoghi Effendi's observation that humanity is plunging “into greater depths of despair, degradation,

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6 The Universal House of Justice states: “The inexorable advance of the world towards the unification of the human race is driven by irrepressible processes of integration and disintegration” (22 Mar. 2006).

dissension, and distress” (*Citadel*). In this connection, it is helpful to think in terms of the following six interrelated defects of being, doing, and associating, namely, the defects of

1) *distress*, or desperation. For many, this defect is the result of an acute awareness that, for all the advances that have been made, there remains an exasperating paucity of the focused, united, collective will necessary to address the ominous calamities now facing humanity on both a global and a national scale (climate change and the coronavirus pandemic being clear examples of the former; the disproportionate prevalence, at the time of writing this paper, of COVID-19 cases and related deaths in America being an example of the latter). Others are desperate because they feel their way of life is being eroded by unwanted, ever-encroaching change, and thus respond by retreating into various forms of tribalism, factionalism, and fanaticism as an ostensible way to channel their energies and give voice to their angst. Yet others are desperate because they are the targets of persistent, systemic discrimination—and the disparities in material wealth that result from it—an insidiously rampant feature of society that has never been snuffed out, but rather, as Shoghi Effendi states in relation to racial prejudice, “has bitten into the fiber, and attacked the whole social structure of American society” (*Advent*), and which is yet again being laid bare in all its vileness. Many now also feel that society is veering out of control in the face of what appear to

be devastating predicaments related to health, social relations, the economy, the electoral process and the struggle for power, and the incapacity of those in positions of authority to unify and chart a steady course forward—though, it should be acknowledged, there are notable exceptions around the world as well as some determined efforts to reshape politics to be more constructive. A corollary of such distress is

2) *dissension*, or discord, which occurs between various groups—countries, political parties, races, cultures, religions, sexes, and so on. While discord is often ideologically driven, it is also fueled by a cult of individualism and the associated perception that life amounts to a series of zero-sum games. It is, moreover, perpetuated by reductionist, dogmatic, antagonistic, and polarizing thought and speech with flimsy (or deliberately distorted) links to reality, which, in turn, create an environment in which constructive dialogue becomes all but impossible while the voice of demagoguery—and the delusions of grandeur and cult of personality that accompany it—becomes increasingly brazen. This defect is correlated with

3) *degradation*,<sup>7</sup> by which is meant the dissipation of morality, courage, and intellectual curiosity, and the concurrent escalation of corruption, debauchery, hypocritical opportunism, sycophantism, and what seems to be a

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7 Recent authors have arrived at similar assessments. One notable example is Ross Douthat, who views the current moment as one of collective decadence.

well-groomed, if not a deep-rooted, desire to backbite, vilify, scapegoat, and persecute, as well as to erode political and social norms. This is a common theme today, amplified by, for example, the obstinacy and hateful pettiness of partisan politics and the now-pervasive instinct to react impetuously and share one's basest thoughts over various forms of media, both social and mainstream. On this point, the Universal House of Justice states the following in a letter written on its behalf:

One conspicuous symptom of society's deepening malaise is the steady descent of public discourse into greater rancour and enmity, reflecting entrenched partisan points of view. A prevalent feature of such contemporary discourse is how political disagreements rapidly degenerate into invective and ridicule. However, what particularly differentiates the present age from those that preceded it is how so much of this discourse occurs in full view of the world. Social media and related communication tools tend to give the greatest exposure to all that is controversial . . . (1 Dec. 2019)

A major factor related to such degradation is an overarching sense of

4) *disenchantment* with the world, or the sense that it lacks purpose, inspirational mystery, or narrative cohesion. Max Weber speaks of this trend in his analysis of the rationalization of society and the rise of instrumentalist

thinking, but it has also been a major theme since at least the Romantics and is reflected in much recent literature concerned with how to achieve meaning and contentment in one's life.<sup>8</sup> Disenchantment is associated directly with the next defect, namely

5) *displacement*, the meaning of which is captured by such words as anomie and alienation—alienation from the world, from others, from one's community, and from one's creative self. Here, the prevailing sense is one of rootlessness not only caused by calamities such as forced migration but also exacerbated today by our consumerist culture, caught up as we are with identity, images, and signs—some of which are more ephemeral than others, but all of which can become the subject of dispute. In such an ethos, moreover, sincerity and the potential for constructive change are displaced by ubiquitous skepticism.

The last interrelated defect in this proposed scheme is

6) *despair*—very much a Kierkegaardian theme. Despair refers to both the anxiety we feel and to our attempt to escape it by habitually seeking diversions and mindlessly committing ourselves to rituals and trivialities. Living in a sea of conflict, polarization, moral fluidity, groundlessness,

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8 Examples include publications by Emily Esfahani Smith, Scott Galloway, Ryan Holiday, and Jordan B. Peterson. Then there is, of course, Viktor Frankl's influential reflections on finding personal meaning under the most deleterious of circumstances.



and materialism, many of us are more than happy to settle for mediocrity as it pertains to our creative, social, intellectual, and spiritual potential, and to do so while unwittingly laboring to deceive ourselves into thinking we have done all we can do to be the best we can truly be.

Taken together, these defects recall Shoghi Effendi's warnings in a letter dated 28 July 1954 regarding the "extreme seriousness" of the "spiritual, moral, social and political" crisis before America. He says that "the most arresting and distressing aspect of the decline that has set in, and can be clearly perceived, in the fortunes of the entire nation" is

the steady and alarming deterioration in the standard of morality as exemplified by the appalling increase of crime, by political corruption in ever widening and ever higher circles, by the loosening of the sacred ties of marriage, by the inordinate craving for pleasure and diversion, and by the marked and progressive slackening of parental control . . . (*Citadel*)

In the same letter, he also highlights the "crass materialism" that is "pervading all departments of life," the "ominous laxity in morals," the "darkening of the political horizon," and the "ingrained racial prejudice," which, "if allowed to drift, will, in the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cause the streets of American cities to run with blood . . ."

#### DELUSIONAL HABITS OF MIND: THREE CAVEATS

In considering the following delusional habits of mind which, it is argued, perpetuate the six defects of being, doing, and associating outlined above, it is important to remember three caveats.

The first caveat is that these habits of mind take hold of people in different ways and to different degrees depending on various social, cultural, and psychological factors, which cannot be properly addressed in a paper of this length. In general, for example, one could say that the proclivity to totalize is more a feature of Eastern societies whereas the proclivity to fragment is more a feature of the West—at least since the demise of overtly fascist (or more totalistic) societies in the wake of World War II. But there are certainly strains of totalism and fragmentism in both the East and the West. There is reason to believe, for example, that fascist tendencies are resurfacing in the West. Madeleine Albright, who sees fascism as a recurring phenomenon, has made a compelling case in this regard, as have a number of other commentators who have recently worried on cable news and other media that American democracy itself could collapse if attacks on its political norms and institutions—from both without and within—were allowed to continue. On a related note, over the last number of years, many have debated whether we have been moving towards George Orwell's depiction of a dystopia dominated by totalitarian mind-control

achieved through, for instance, fear, the methodical erosion of language, the unscrupulous revisioning of history, and thus the enfeebling of our ability to engage in independent thought, or towards Aldous Huxley's depiction of a society of people tranquilized by shallow pleasures and distractions. What follows would suggest that both writers were prophetic to an extent.

The second caveat is that these macro habits of mind, while inherently defective, can manifest in different ways, some of which are more problematic than others. The racist worldview, for example, is infinitely more problematic (not to mention repugnant) than the pluralistic one, although, as alluded to below, the latter is not without its own difficulties. As Derik Smith argues regarding the metaphor of the "pupil of the eye", which Bahá'u'lláh likens to people of African descent,

the anomalous nature of the metaphor—the fact that Bahá'u'lláh seems to have reserved this exceptional favoring for black people—highlights the particularly virulent role that anti-black ideology has played in the constitution of modern social and philosophical thought, and suggests that anti-blackness is a distinctively ominous impediment to human oneness. (10)

The third caveat is that, in addition to the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, the analysis that follows, except for a few allusions, is informed by ideas

found in the Western tradition. It is acknowledged that much would be gained by also drawing upon other traditions. Consequently, thinkers with greater knowledge of, say, Eastern, Indigenous, and African thought may be interested in sharing their insights on how such traditions bear on the questions and arguments advanced in this essay.

#### THE MACRO HABIT OF TOTALIZING REALITY

The macro habit of totalizing reality, which perpetuates the six defects of being, doing, and associating, refers to the proclivity to encapsulate the world, or as many perceivable aspects of it as possible, within an increasingly regimented worldview—to grapple with and explain more and more of what is seen of reality in terms of the worldview's organizing logic. To identify this habit is not to condemn the search for intelligible explanations of reality; it is only natural for us, as human beings, to want to understand the world we live in and to do so by striving to develop cohesive lenses through which to perceive it, lenses which we believe adequately describe it and provide suitable explanations of our place within it. Rather, to totalize, as the term is being employed here,<sup>9</sup> is to take this longing to the point where we summarily dismiss whatever does not fit neatly within the parameters of our

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<sup>9</sup> The term typically means "to make total."

worldview as anomalous, absurd, or senseless, or repudiate it as deviant or antagonistic; as such, it is contrary to the idea of “reading society with higher and higher degrees of accuracy” as “an explicit element of the methodology of learning” (Office of Social and Economic Development).

The supreme manifestation of this habit on the collective level is totalitarianism, but it also takes on other forms such as various political ideologies, religious fundamentalism, and materialist scientism. Regarding the latter, for example, some advocates of scientism—the conviction that no area of investigation has merit unless it properly applies the methods of natural science—in fact hold that the reaches of science are immeasurable, that its potential knowledge is boundless. Rudolf Carnap declares that “[w]hen we say that scientific knowledge is unlimited, we mean: *there is no question whose answer is in principle unattainable by science*” (qtd. in Sorell 6, italics original). Thus, science, from this perspective, is the totality through which all of reality should invariably be understood.

In what follows, the focus will primarily be on the compulsion to ideologize, or the habit of ideologizing, which is an offspring of the macro habit of totalizing reality. To facilitate understanding of this habit, a useful concept to have at our disposal is that of the *paradigm* as employed by Thomas Kuhn (*Structure*) in relation to what he calls *normal science*.

#### PARADIGMS AND NORMAL SCIENCE

Kuhn uses the term *paradigm* in a variety of ways, but the most applicable one here is the concept of a paradigm-as-shared-set-of-values (Hacking 10), a scientific worldview that stipulates the community’s theoretical orientation and set of fundamental beliefs, principles, vocabulary, and standards for scientific practice. It is, moreover, a worldview that is incommensurable—or not readily comparable—with other worldviews, a comprehensive theoretical construct that powerfully conditions the way in which its adherents observe and deal with phenomena.

A related concept is what Kuhn calls *normal science*, which scientists are habitually involved in, and which amounts to puzzle solving within a specific scientific paradigm. By *puzzle solving*, he means that the paradigm sets out the rules, standards, and problems to be addressed and that scientists, abiding by these rules and standards, embark on missions to solve these problems. In this way, science is able to progress. Without the paradigm and the comforting supposition that certain fundamental questions have been settled and important criteria established, science is rendered aimless and ineffectual.

At the same time, according to Kuhn, normal science has its limits. What drives the scientist within a paradigm “is the conviction that, if only he [sic] is skillful enough, he will succeed in solving a puzzle that no one before has solved or solved so well” (*Structure*

38). Moreover, like the jigsaw puzzle where only one solution is acceptable, the scientist resolves the problem only when his or her solution conforms to the expectations of the paradigm. The trick is to arrive at an explanation that works in accordance with such standards. Normal science, then, is about “fitting” phenomena within the paradigmatic construct better than anyone else has done, about successfully constructing phenomena from the paradigmatic point of view. When he or she manages to do so, the scientist proves his or her brilliance.

### *Contending with Anomalies*

In the process of puzzle solving, scientists run into what Kuhn calls *anomalies*. “The more precise and far-reaching [the] paradigm is” (*Structure* 65), the more extensively it is compared with the world, and hence the greater the likelihood that it will encounter instances of novelty. This is generally a good thing for the paradigm, since if it were not for anomalies, paradigmatic articulation would be impossible and conceptual sterility would set in. Anomalies are often regarded as puzzles that one can expect to solve if one is ingenious enough. Here the paradigm holds sway. It takes these phenomena in, bandies them about, and renders them conceptually intelligible—that is, it makes them paradigmatically meaningful or agreeable, fabricated in line with its prevailing expectations. The paradigm may adjust in the process, but it does so

without endangering that which is fundamental to it.<sup>10</sup>

The alternative is to acknowledge the anomalies for the challenges they pose to the paradigm, but this would require a probing re-evaluation of what the defenders of the paradigm have come to champion. It may threaten the very foundations upon which their (normal scientific) work is based; it would, in any case, mean entertaining the limitations of their worldview. These are tough notions. So, attempts are made to neutralize anomalies, to assimilate them within—albeit modified, but not fundamentally so—paradigmatic parameters, to repackage them.

But not all anomalies can be successfully assimilated. Some are too persistent, ringing with blatant clarity, challenging with seeming impudence. They can also accrue over time and so come to exert formidable pressure on the conceptual walls of the paradigm. In other words, these anomalies may become conspicuous and glaringly so. As such, they defy articulation and so cannot be ignored or made intelligible, let alone be integrated. Instead, now the paradigm is forced to conform itself to the point where it inevitably falls into

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10 On this point, Kuhn says, “All theories can be modified by a variety of *ad hoc* adjustments without ceasing to be, in their main lines, the same theories. It is important, furthermore, that this should be so, for it is often by challenging observations or adjusting theories that scientific knowledge grows. Challenges and adjustments are a standard part of normal research in empirical science. . .” (*Essential Tension* 281).

crisis, “set[ting] the stage for its demise” (Barnes 91). And when a viable rival paradigm emerges, the result is paradigmatic shift, or revolution—a leap into a whole new way of understanding and coping with the world, a conceptual switch into a brand-new totality that demands of its adherents its own articulation through the puzzle-solving activity of normal science.

### *Relevance of Kuhn’s Account*

There is much debate about the accuracy of Kuhn’s accounts of normal science and scientific revolution. A prominent alternative is Imre Lakatos’s model of a scientific research program (see Godfrey-Smith 103–107), which consists of a hard core of theoretical assumptions and concepts combined with a protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses that can be sacrificed or altered in the face of anomalies, thus safeguarding the hard core. The main point, however, is that such concepts as the paradigm, normal science, and/or the research program, or, more recently, Daniel Kahneman’s concepts of confirmation bias and cognitive coherence, help to clarify what it means to totalize in the more general sense, even if they do not exactly describe what happens in a given (scientific) community.

For example, is it not fair to say that we are prone to developing the habit—through parenting, education, socialization, particular experiences, social media, and so on—of seeing the world in a certain way; of rationalizing

the way we have come to see the world when challenged by countervailing evidence; of, in fact, laboring to mold the anomalous in accordance with our particular worldview, or to explain it away when we are not able to? Further, is it not reasonable to claim that, in more extreme cases, we can end up diminishing and even persecuting those who challenge our conceptions of the way things are or should be and that it can take a massive amount of anomalous push before we are willing to seriously question the adequacy of our worldview and see things differently? In the discussion of ideology that follows, there is much to suggest that the answer to each of these questions is “yes” and that the six defects of being, doing, and associating are perpetuated as a consequence.

### THE COMPULSION TO IDEOLOGIZE

As already noted, there are certainly benefits associated with the impulse to totalize reality which are important to consider. Mark Lilla can be understood as drawing attention to some of them in his 2014 article “The Truth about Our Libertarian Age.” In this article, he distinguishes between ideology and dogma, arguing that the former is preferable to the latter, but that we have unfortunately lapsed into the latter. He in fact seems nostalgic for the age of ideology which, in his view, characterized the Cold War.

Lilla makes a good case for his wistfulness, portraying our current age as one in which we have lost our capacity

to read reality. He says, for example, that “[w]e lack adequate concepts or even a vocabulary for describing the world” and that “[t]he end of ideology has not meant the lifting of clouds. It has brought a fog so thick that we can no longer read what is right before us. We find ourselves in an illegible age.”

An ideology, in his mind, “does something different: it holds us in its grasp with an enchanting picture of reality. To follow the optical metaphor, ideology takes an undifferentiated visual field and brings it into focus, so that objects appear in a predetermined relation to each other.” In other words, an ideology, like Kuhn’s paradigm, provides a worldview, coherence, a way of reading reality that is consistent and meaningful to those who adhere to it. It provides a map that helps us to picture the world and get on with our projects. It upholds grand narratives, such as historical materialism, that make sense out of what is otherwise incoherent, that “[try] to master the historical forces shaping society by first understanding them.”

### *Ideology versus Libertarian Dogma*

By comparison, Lilla equates dogma with libertarianism. Whereas many, such as the sociologist Daniel Bell, thought that the erosion of ideology would, in Lilla’s words, “free up minds to investigate the subtle and unexpected interactions between the political, economic, and cultural spheres of modern social life as they develop over

time,” quite the opposite has happened. Instead, in an age where self-determination, or individual autonomy, is most highly prized, the will to inquire has withered. Because ideologies are totalizing, there is the problem that they lead to totalitarianism. On the other hand,

Our libertarianism operates differently: it is supremely dogmatic, and like every dogma it sanctions ignorance about the world, and therefore blinds adherents to its effects in that world. It begins with basic liberal principles—the sanctity of the individual, the priority of freedom, distrust of public authority, tolerance—and advances no further. It has no taste for reality, no curiosity about how we got here or where we are going.

Libertarian dogma, moreover, does not foster the generation of knowledge or say anything decipherable about the way the world actually is or works. It does not, for example, question the advantages of democracy as practiced in the West, which, incidentally, is a relatively new form of governance. It just assumes it is the way to go. Invoking Kuhn, it might be said that the anomalies our democracy faces are, for all intents and purposes, ignored, or not even noticed; the attempt to puzzle solve doesn’t even take place.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> It should be acknowledged that one could now reasonably dispute this conclusion given, as alluded to in this essay,

Further, with ideology, one locates oneself in relationship to the collective. With libertarian dogma, this relationship falls apart; the notion that any synergy could exist between individual and collective purposes evaporates. Again, this result is detrimental and certainly the opposite of being in a learning mode. As Lilla goes on to explain, the libertarian age “has given birth to a new kind of hubris unlike that of the old master thinkers.” “Our hubris,” he says, “is to think that we no longer have to think hard or pay attention or look for connections, that all we have to do is stick to our ‘democratic values’ and economic models and faith in the individual and all will be well.” Moreover,

Having witnessed unpleasant scenes of intellectual drunkenness, we have become self-satisfied abstainers removed from history and unprepared for the challenges it is already bringing. The end of the cold war destroyed whatever confidence in ideology still remained in the West. But it also seems to have destroyed our will to understand. We have abdicated.

Drawing upon the typology of the six defects of being, doing, and associating, it might be added that, having embraced a culture of intellectual degradation, we have consequently become

disenchanted and displaced, and have given up on exploring anything deeper or more meaningful than the superficial. We have thus brought upon ourselves an overarching sense of despair.

### *The Relative Strengths and Challenges of Ideology*

Like Kuhn’s account of normal science, there is surely merit to Lilla’s account, but there are also problems with it. On the one hand, it makes sense that with the collapse of ideology, as he sees it, a case can be made that we can no longer make intelligible sense of the world and how we should live in it. Without it, it is fair to ask how we are to map reality and advance collectively. His criticism of libertarian dogma is also compelling and fits well with the discussion of fragmentism discussed below. On the other hand, there are reasons to take issue with his account, some of which—outlined briefly here as little more than points of departure for further inquiry—are as follows.

The first reason has simply to do with word choice. Whereas Lilla uses the term *libertarian*, it seems preferable to replace it with a more generic term to avoid linking the dogma and intellectual vacuity he condemns with a particular conservative worldview that is not shared by all. One could make the case, consistent with his general theme, that such dogma now infects a host of worldviews, particularly in the West. In the remainder of this essay, the term *piecemeal* is used instead. Thus, *piecemeal dogma* refers

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the growing concern over the threat to democracy with the rise of populism and fascist tendencies over the last several years.

to dogma that sanctions the abdication of attempts to delve beneath surface reality or achieve coherence. It relates specifically to the macro habit of fragmenting reality discussed below.

Second, it seems hardly contestable that ideologies such as, but not limited to, fascism, communism, Nazism, and nationalism, can lead to havoc in the world, thus contributing significantly to such defects as dissension, displacement, and degradation. As explained in the statement *Century of Light*: “The consequence of humanity’s infatuation with the ideologies its own mind had conceived was to produce a terrifying acceleration of the process of disintegration that was dissolving the fabric of social life and cultivating the basest impulses of human nature.” The nineteenth and twentieth centuries are fraught with examples.

Third, totalism in the form of ideology is arguably still a force today. As further stated in *Century of Light*:

The overthrow of the twentieth century’s totalitarian systems has not meant the end of ideology. On the contrary. There has not been a society in the history of the world, no matter how pragmatic, experimentalist and multi-form it may have been, that did not derive its thrust from some foundational interpretation of reality.

From this perspective, one could argue that the libertarian dogmatism that Lilla criticizes (or piecemeal dogmatism) is itself a species of ideology, that is,

a system of thought that “philosophically and politically presents itself as a kind of liberal relativism; economically and socially, as capitalism—two value systems that have now so adjusted to each other and become so mutually reinforcing as to constitute virtually a single, comprehensive world-view” (*Century of Light*). Perhaps, in line with Lilla’s account, this worldview is no longer as systematic as it may have been; nor, perhaps, is it as cohesive as other forms of ideology that dominated in the twentieth century. Yet, it still holds powerful sway over the Western imagination. The same could be said of the many varieties of totalism we see today, such as the tribalism that has emerged out of an identity politics that is in many respects fueled by this liberal relativism. As discussed further below, present-day tribalism can be understood to be the result of totalism and fragmentism working together, the latter of which weakens the internal coherence of such worldviews while concurrently furnishing them with an us-or-them character that holds each one intact, if only superficially.

Fourth, certain forms of totalism, or ideology, still tend to foreclose many legitimate ways of understanding reality, which means they are also dogmatic. Like Kuhn’s scientific paradigm, they work to align the anomalous with their underlying assumptions, sometimes with dangerous consequences. This totalistic tendency can also be referred to as *paradigmatic colonization*, which denotes the process of actively incorporating (anomalous) phenomena into



a paradigm's purview—into its way of organizing reality. It consists of taking such phenomena in and molding them until they obtain paradigmatic palatability. More than this, to paradigmatically colonize is to construct more and more facets of reality from the paradigmatic point of view without necessarily doing so in a manner that is attuned to those facets. And when other worldviews are subjugated as a consequence, it is also to paradigmatically imperialize.

Scientism—as opposed to science itself—is, as noted above, arguably a good example of such totalism, or paradigmatic colonization, in action. Its aim is to extend the methods and concepts of materialist science to other spheres where they may not truly belong. In other words,

The thought behind the forging of this unity—that it is highly desirable for the concepts and methodology of established sciences to be spread, and unsatisfactory for, for example, ethics or history to be left in their prescientific state—captures the scientism in scientific empiricism. (Sorell 9)

More radically, the thought is that such fields must become scientific if they are to have any credence or value. Consequently, fields untouched by science may be dismissed as irrelevant or nonsensical.

The concept of paradigmatic colonization also applies to religious fundamentalism, which, as the House of Justice explains, brings with it “an

exceedingly narrow understanding of religion and spirituality,” but which “continues to gather strength, threatening to engulf humanity in rigid dogmatism” (2 Apr. 2010). Furthermore,

In its most extreme form, it conditions the resolution of the problems of the world upon the occurrence of events derived from illogical and superstitious notions. It professes to uphold virtue yet, in practice, perpetuates oppression and greed. Among the deplorable results of the operation of such forces are a deepening confusion on the part of young people everywhere, a sense of hopelessness in the ranks of those who would drive progress, and the emergence of a myriad social maladies.

Drawing upon the six defects of being, doing, and associating, such maladies include the defect of displacement, which involves the “deepening confusion” described in the passage above; the defect of dissension, which manifests as the drive to conform, to subjugate, and, in some cases, to rid the world of the “evil other”; and, by extension, the defect of degradation, which, among other ways, surfaces as the moral degeneracy of fanatical leaders who employ ideology in the form of doctrinal distortion to beguile their devoted followers into carrying out such brutal atrocities as the torturing and killing of people they are conditioned to regard as exemplars of depravity in the world. In this regard, it

is worth noting that William S. Hatcher relates the power of such ideology to the difficulty of pursuing authentic relationships,<sup>12</sup> stating that

*ideology gives moral justification to inauthentic behavior, even the deliberate perpetration of cruelty towards others.* Therein lies both the attraction and the power of ideology. Belief in an ideology relieves us of the necessity of the disciplined pursuit of authentic relationships by authenticizing inauthentic behavior, including active cruelty and hatred towards certain appropriately defined others. Thus, the fact of inauthentic behavior is conjoined with a moral justification for that fact, thereby allowing “good people” to do truly bad things. (Italics original)

More generally, it could be maintained, in line with the critical tradition inspired by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The German Ideology*, that ideology obfuscates reality in the interests of those in power and thus needs

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12 Hatcher defines an authentic relationship between two people as “a totally reciprocal relationship based on the mutual recognition of the universal value which they each share as human beings and which is inherent in their essential nature. This value is their uniquely human capacities of consciousness, of intellect, of feeling (heart), and of will. The mark of authenticity in human relations is the presence of self-sacrificing (unconditional) love, or altruism.”

to be challenged in order for the oppressed to see past it and get at what is real. From this perspective, social reality consists of oppressive contradictions that ideology seemingly irons out and rationalizes, thus producing false consciousness. Antonio Gramsci's insights are helpful here. For him, the exploitive social order remains largely intact through ideological subjugation, or the strategic promulgation of ruling class ideas which invariably come to be taken as common sense by all classes. He calls this condition “hegemony,” and the challenge, he feels, is to see through the illusions that are systematically packaged as ordinary and necessary. Otherwise we remain alienated from our true potential, we aspire to little more than mediocrity, and we thus wallow in the defective state of despair.

#### THE MACRO HABIT OF FRAGMENTING REALITY

The second macro habit which perpetuates the six defects of being, doing, and associating is the macro habit of fragmenting reality. This habit entails a number of related tendencies which can be observed at both the analytical level and the social level. At the analytical level, it involves the compulsions to break phenomena down, to reduce them, to compartmentalize the resulting fragments, to divorce them from context, and to fabricate unwarranted dichotomies. The predominant drive is to delimit rather than to correlate, a predilection that informs many arenas

of activity, including academia, the legal system, and both party and identity politics. At the social level, its preeminent form is the compulsion to atomize, or to live individualistically, which often entails retreating into the private sphere and which has become associated in recent decades with the compulsion to hyper-consume, as discussed further below. As discussed earlier, fragmentism refers to the cognitive and/or social condition in which this habit of mind predominates. It can also refer to the view or philosophy that the habit of fragmenting reality is natural, normal, or desirable.

THE COMPULSIONS TO REDUCE,  
COMPARTMENTALIZE,  
AND DICHOTOMIZE

To draw attention to the macro habit of fragmenting reality is not to condemn the activity of analysis itself, an essential feature, for example, of science. Rather, it is, in part, to highlight the problem of doing analysis to excess, that is, of doing it without paying due attention to complexity, context, coherence, interrelationships, process, and the possibility of synthesis. It is to ignore, as David Bohm states, the fact that reality is “unbroken and undivided, and all phenomena are simply perturbations in this single whole” (qtd. in Butler-Bowdon 62).

In this respect, the Universal House of Justice states:

The institutions and agencies of the Faith should help the believers

to analyse but not reduce, to ponder meaning but not dwell on words, to identify distinct areas of action but not compartmentalize. We realize that this is no small task. Society speaks more and more in slogans. We hope that the habits the friends are forming in study circles to work with full and complex thoughts and to achieve understanding will be extended to various spheres of activity.

Closely related to the habit of reducing an entire theme into one or two appealing phrases is the tendency to perceive dichotomies, where, in fact, there are none. It is essential that ideas forming part of a cohesive whole not be held in opposition to one another. (28 Dec. 2010)

In the same letter, it also explains that “a significant advance in culture, one which we have followed with particular interest, is marked by the rise in capacity to think in terms of process,” and it warns that if “events are imposed on the natural unfoldment of a process, they will disrupt its sound evolution.” Instead, events should be treated as part of the evolving tapestry of the process itself.

On a related note, the House of Justice emphasizes the dangers of the academic fragmentation that is a feature of society today, and calls, instead, for the integration of knowledge. In a letter written on its behalf, it states:

One of the problems of modern times is the degree to which the different disciplines have become specialized and isolated from one another. Thinkers are now faced with a challenge to achieve a synthesis, or at least a coherent correlation, of the vast amount of knowledge that has been acquired during the past century. (*Compilation* no. 430)

In another letter written on its behalf, it affirms “that, with patience, self-discipline, and unity of faith, Bahá'í academics will be able to contribute to a gradual forging of the more integrative paradigms of scholarship for which thoughtful minds in the international community are increasingly calling” (20 July 1997).

### *Specialization and Coherence*

The idea being put forward here is not that specialization is inherently defective. In the 24 July 2013 message written on its behalf, the House of Justice draws attention to the merits of special interest groups coming together “to intensify their efforts.” It also states: “In the decades ahead . . . a host of believers will enter diverse social spaces and fields of human endeavour.” Yet, the guidance does appear to suggest that taken too far and divorced from context and other areas of learning, specialization becomes problematic. A helpful analogy is how Bahá'ís are encouraged to understand the educational process at the core of their

community-building endeavors. As the House of Justice explains:

From one perspective an educational process with three distinct stages appears in sharp relief: the first for the youngest members of the community, the second for those in the challenging transitional years, and the third for youth and adults. In this context, one speaks of three educational imperatives, each distinguished by its own methods and materials, each claiming a share of resources, and each served by mechanisms to systematize experience and to generate knowledge based on insights gained in the field. Quite naturally, then, three discussions take shape around the implementation of the programme for the spiritual education of children, the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, and the main sequence of courses. (12 Dec. 2011)

Thus, in one regard, each educational imperative has its own logic, dynamics, and objectives. No one of the three imperatives can be reduced to either one of the other two. But while distinct, they are also not autonomous from one another. That is, while attention needs to be given to each stage of the educational process in accordance with its specific requirements, consideration also needs to be given to how the three stages relate to and reinforce each other, and how the entire process is evolving coherently. As explained

in the same letter, periodic meetings must

be created for the three coordinators appointed by the institute—or, where applicable, teams of coordinators concerned with study circles, junior youth groups and children's classes respectively—to examine together the strength of the educational process as a whole.

In short, and as discussed in Part Two of this paper, it seems that for the distinct parts and the whole to evolve, the dynamic interplay between them needs to be understood and fostered.

#### THE COMPULSION TO ATOMIZE OR INDIVIDUALIZE

In terms of how it manifests at the social level, the macro habit of fragmenting reality leads ultimately to intense individualism. The individualistic mindset takes as its starting point John Stuart Mill's principle that each individual should be able to do as he or she wishes so long as doing so does not cause harm to anyone else. It is generally associated with negative freedom (freedom from constraints) and aligns with the desire to liberate the individual from the tyranny of either the minority or the majority as well as from the intellectual colonization and hegemonic shackles of totalizing theories. This notion is a common libertarian mindset, which elevates the individual over the collective and celebrates personal

expression over collective volition. Here, the atom is supreme while the whole pales in significance. In its pure form, it suggests that there is in fact no collective will, which is considered a good thing, for its absence grants the individual the flexibility to experiment with different ways of living. In the absence of collective constraints, people are free to pursue their own projects as they see fit. Such experiments, the argument goes, are good for society, keeping it alive to new and potentially vitalizing possibilities.

#### *Problems with Individualism*

The individualistic mindset has its benefits. It has contributed to, for example, the conviction that all individuals have certain rights and freedoms that are inalienable and cannot be transgressed. It has also contributed to innovation in various forms that have proven beneficial to society.

However, taken to its logical conclusion, it is also arguably riddled with problems, not least of which is the paradoxical strain that arises between the individualist impulse itself and the concomitant pluralism—and the toleration for diversity—it ostensibly champions. Ironically, advocates of pluralism often end up being tolerant only on condition that their particular conceptions of who or what should be tolerated are shared. When they are not shared, the “tolerant” ones are prone to labelling the “offending” or “ignorant” others as phobic or politically incorrect. They may be right in certain cases, but such labeling

is contradictory as it undercuts the very notions of individualism, pluralism, and the freedom of conscience and speech that the “tolerant” ones claim to espouse. As such, individualism can easily degenerate into self-righteousness, chauvinism, conflict, and, ironically, a tyranny of the majority (to say nothing of the fact that those who remain “tolerated” can feel patronized). In its pure form, it is paradoxical in the way that relativism is paradoxical: the committed relativist cannot claim to be right without falling into contradiction. Some relativists might be fine with living with the contradiction, but they will always be at pains to demonstrate how their view is rationally sound.

A second problem with individualism is that it is impossible to live as a consistent individualist. While individualists ostensibly devalue anything larger than the individual, like the community or the state, they invariably cannot help but rely on that which they devalue. Some individualists are more consistent than others, priding themselves on their relative self-sufficiency and integrity as unique persons. But it is never the case that they achieve total autonomy: there is always something society has to offer (infrastructure, vital services, law enforcement, etcetera) which they cannot do without and which helps them to pursue their individual projects.<sup>13</sup>

Even less consistent is the me-centrism that combines a longing to be individually free with a posture of entitlement. Here, the individual essentially wants three freedoms: the freedom to make choices without constraints, the freedom to avail oneself of the requisite means society or others have to offer in order to exercise the first freedom, and the additional freedom to take those means for granted. It is not difficult to see how this mentality is problematic. At the very least, it contributes to a culture in which individuals end up treating each other instrumentally, that is, as little more than means to personal ends rather than as ends in themselves (a Kantian concern). As such, me-centrism writ large undermines itself, contributing directly to the defects of dissension and displacement. It defeats the whole ethos of individualism as an ideology.

A third, related, problem is that such atomism hollows out its very objective, namely, achieving authenticity and the meaning that derives from exercising freedom of choice. It renders this objective frivolous or devoid of significance, exacerbating in this way the defects of distress and disenchantment. Charles Taylor addresses this point, stating that the danger before us is “fragmentation—that is, a people increasingly less capable of forming a common purpose and carrying it out. Fragmentation arises when people come to see themselves

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13 It should be acknowledged that much has been written about this topic which cannot be properly considered in this paper. Many libertarians, for example, acknowledge the need for at least some

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governmental oversight and/or assistance, even if they see it as a necessary evil. What is being suggested here is simply that it is impossible to practically take individualism to its logical conclusion.

more and more atomistically, otherwise put, as less and less bound to their fellow citizens in common projects and allegiances” (112–113). This atomistic view is problematic because “[t]hings take on importance against a background of intelligibility,” which Taylor calls “a horizon” (37). In this connection: “It follows that one of the things we can’t do, if we are to define ourselves significantly, is suppress or deny the horizons against which things take on significance for us.” As he continues: “Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands” (41). In fact, the value of any given choice “depends on the understanding that independent of my will there is something noble, courageous, and hence significant in giving shape to my own life” (39). The alternative is to slip into treating relationships as little more than instrumentalities of individual self-fulfillment, an eventuality which Taylor considers “a self-stultifying travesty” (22).

Part of Taylor’s solution to the atomistic worldview is to “undertake a work of retrieval...[to] identify and articulate the higher ideal behind the more or less debased practices, and then criticize these practices from the standpoint of their own motivating ideal” (72). We can go further and suggest that the solution involves 1) recognizing that there are certain foundational realities—such as the oneness of humanity and the inherent nobility of every single human being—that require ongoing articulation in light of the conviction that “humanity is on a common

journey in which all are protagonists” (Universal House of Justice, 18 Jan. 2019); and 2) scrutinizing and transforming reality from this progressively articulated standpoint. As discussed in Part Two of this paper, this approach is indispensable if meaning, authenticity, and freedom are to be realized and continuously refined and the six defects of being, doing, and associating are to be resolved.

A fourth problem with individualism relates directly to the next compulsion associated with the macro habit of fragmenting reality.

#### THE COMPULSION TO HYPER-CONSUME<sup>14</sup>

According to Bahá’u’lláh, we have been created noble. In the *Hidden Words*, He states that God has engraved upon us His image (Arabic no. 3) and that each of us is “even as a finely tempered sword concealed in the darkness of its sheath and its value hidden from the artificer’s knowledge” (Persian no. 72). Our duty is to “come forth from the sheath of self and desire that [our] worth may be made resplendent and manifest unto all the world.”

For the most part, humanity has yet to heed this call. We largely persist

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14 George Ritzer and other sociologists discuss what they call “hyperconsumption”—the largely unreflective, often manic, consumption of goods that serve no ostensibly functional purpose—a condition that characterizes the world we live in today, particularly in the more materially affluent capitalist societies.

within our sheaths of self and desire, and thus, as the House of Justice explains in a letter written on its behalf, prolong an age that has largely “bowed to the dictates of materialism” (19 Apr. 2013). This persistence, moreover, has had tremendous consequences for how we perceive reality, ourselves, and our purpose as human beings. As the House of Justice expounds on the subject in the same letter,

the expenditure of enormous energy and vast amounts of resources in an attempt to bend truth to conform to personal desire is now a feature of many contemporary societies. The result is a culture that distorts human nature and purpose, trapping human beings in pursuit of idle fancies and vain imaginings and turning them into pliable objects in the hands of the powerful.

In such a culture, moreover, we view ourselves as sophisticated animals that are naturally egoistic, atomistic, competitive, and even conflictive. We are concerned with the pursuit of happiness, which is often equated, wittingly or not, with the acquisition of material goods.

#### *Fixed and Fluid Fragmentation*

This yearning to consume is a theme that has been addressed by many social critics during this and the last century. It is one of the major preoccupations of Jean Baudrillard (*Consumer*), who claims that, given how capitalism

operates today, it is the consumer rather than the worker that needs to be controlled. Neo-Marxists such as Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse raise similar concerns. For them, too, the focus has become the buyer. In order to drive the capitalist engine and keep rebellion at bay, false needs must be artificially generated and promulgated. Consumers need to be lured into purchasing well beyond what is necessary to live and prosper, into seeing the superfluous as central. Hence the growth of the mass media and pervasiveness of advertising, the consequent inundation of sensory stimulants, and the rise and increasing sophistication of what critical theorists call “the culture industry”—all of which serve to manipulate and anesthetize the population, gratify fabricated desires, and thereby curtail the stirrings of discontent (in a manner akin to Huxley’s conception of a dystopia).

The state of fragmentation, moreover, is especially dizzying in consumer society. Historically the fragmentation may have been more static, or formulaic, in the form of distinct, enduring, and predictable roles and identities wrapped, for example, around occupation, gender, and religious affiliation. More recently, however, it has taken on more fleeting, haphazard, and eclectic forms, especially in what some, like Baudrillard (*Simulacra*), have identified as a hyperreal world in which signs, social codes, and personal identities are constantly being juxtaposed, negotiated, replicated, and exchanged to the point where it seems that reality itself is composed of little



more than an ongoing play of images. This is a condition that has only been heightened by the rise of social media, the proliferation of online influencers, etcetera, the impact of which is to continually bombard the individual with overt and subtle messages about who and how to be. Thus, we can think of a continuum of fragmentation that spans from the more established to the more evanescent—from what can be referred to as *fixed fragmentation* to *fluid fragmentation*.

Zygmunt Bauman's distinction between solid and liquid modernity gets at a similar point. For him, the former is associated with the age of industrial production and the relatively stable norms, traditions, social structures, and jobs to which identities were tied. The latter is associated with consumer culture, which has largely witnessed the dissolution of such norms and structures and the consequent destabilization of the social self. In liquid modernity—characterized by rapid communication, transnational organizations, unprecedented population movement, the relentless bombardment of images, and so on—deep meaning is no longer distinguishable from surface meaning. This condition creates a sense of disequilibrium and purposelessness, which are features of the defects of displacement and disenchantment, respectively.

### *Identity in Consumer Culture*

Further, in such a culture, we are prone to identifying ourselves with what we

consume. The possession of goods becomes a matter of status. We purchase and own certain commodities not because we need them to subsist, but rather to stand out. This is Thorstein Veblen's major insight. The leisure class consumes conspicuously in order to create invidious distinctions—to incite envy—while those “below” seek to emulate the leisure class in order to close the distinction gap. Pierre Bourdieu says something similar, although he places greater emphasis on how the divisions between classes are highlighted. The beverages we drink, the cars we drive, the resorts we choose for vacation, and so on, are all coded with cultural values. Our purchasing habits reinforce class distinctions and fashion how we perceive ourselves and others.<sup>15</sup> In view of the distinction between fixed and fluid fragmentation discussed above, one could argue that such habits develop partly as an attempt to stabilize the fluidity by fixating on such distinctions.

In any case, the results are defective. Drawing upon the exercises in Section 30 of the Ruhi Institute's *The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh: The Universal House of Justice*, we might conclude, for example, that in a consumer society our

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15 They also have tangible consequences in times of crisis, as is clearly the case today. With the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the more well-off have been able to self-isolate in relative comfort while the less well-off have had to face the additional stresses that come with the lack of adequate means to sustain themselves economically and otherwise.

conception of beauty is coupled with the desire to be praised and idolized; business is conducted such that profit is often sought at the expense of justice; friendships are premised on the desire to feel good and are frequently vacuous and unrewarding as a consequence; and freedom manifests itself as a rejection of standards and authority in favor of the unbridled pursuit of base desires. But—it is worth adding—the search for such fulfillment is largely in vain. Humans never achieve satisfaction under such conditions, at least not for very long. Because we are not tapping into our true, spiritual selves, lasting contentment eludes us. We end up leading empty lives instead, propagating the defect of despair. Kierkegaard arrived at similar conclusions some 170 years ago:

So much is spoken about wasting one's life. But the only wasted life is the life of one who has so lived it, deceived by life's pleasures or its sorrows, that he never became decisively, eternally, conscious of himself as spirit, as self, or, what is the same, he never became aware—and gained in the deepest sense the impression—that there is a God there and that "he" himself, his self, exists before this God . . . (57)

### *Perpetuating Our Defective State*

It is certainly true that other, more positive, assumptions inform our thinking about human nature. Otherwise, for

example, there would be no charity in the world; nor would we see the many who are striving today to fight for justice and well-being on behalf of the oppressed in the face of pandemics, racism, and autocratic assaults on democratic freedom. This is one qualification to keep in mind when thinking about the destructive, diversionary, and enervating effects of consumerism.

Another qualification, on the negative side, is the fact that long-term societal diseases like racism exist, suggesting that at least some of the fragmentation in our consumer society is presently at the more fixed end of the continuum rather than at the fluid end. On the one hand, it may certainly be the case that we find ourselves largely at the mercy of the dizzying flux of commodified diversions. On the other hand, underneath this veneer persist longstanding social fissures that the flux has been unable to wash away (one could argue because of its frivolity). While the flux may have succeeded at masking these fissures for a time, as present-day events are making clear, some of the fragmentation remains largely entrenched, or fixed, in our collective consciousness.

Even more, the flux may have actually exacerbated such longstanding fissures. As discussed, consumerism—and the egoism it feeds—exerts a powerful sway over how we see ourselves and interact. Through the egoistic impulse to fulfill material desires, we are prone to embracing competition as the natural mode of relating to each other, an us-or-them mentality, and

the conviction that in order to prosper and flourish, one must advance at the expense of, but also (ironically) in the eyes of, others. This impulse is tied, as we have seen, to a fetish with material products and an obsession with status. It also encourages backbiting, gossip, an ethos of perpetual antagonism, an emboldening of the insistent self and the base desires it seeks to satiate, and, again, the manufacture of artificial needs—many conditions to which Rousseau,<sup>16</sup> the Romantics, Tolstoy, Gandhi, Fromm, Lama Deer, and the Dalai Lama, draw our attention from their various standpoints.

Taken together, we end up back at all six defects of being, doing, and associating—namely, society being in a state of dissension, perpetuated, for example, by consumption for the sake of distinction as well as by longstanding prejudice in its many ugly forms; degradation, particularly of norms, morality, integrity, and what is truly essential to the human condition; disenchantment, because we are caught up in instrumental thinking along with the ephemerality of simulated images and fabricated status; and displacement, in the sense that we feel unrooted and thus in a constant state of instability. All this, moreover, leads to the defect

of despair—or the alienation, mediocrity, cynicism, and lack of fulfillment that come with being addicted to simulations, the flurry of soundbites, and all manner of meaningless distractions; and the defect of distress—or the foreboding sense, when we actually put our minds to it, that we are largely incapable of taking hold of reality and changing it for the better. For these reasons and others, such as those outlined below, one might conclude with Shoghi Effendi that “humanity itself” is “crying out for deliverance at a time when the tide of mounting evils has destroyed its equilibrium and is now strangling its very life” (*Decisive Hour*).

#### CONVERGENCES BETWEEN THE HABITS OF TOTALIZING AND FRAGMENTING REALITY

So far, this essay has largely treated the habits of totalizing and fragmenting reality as distinct macro habits of mind. However, as already alluded to under the section on ideology, there are similarities between them as well as ways in which they work together.

#### THE HABITS OF DOGMATIZING, DISTORTING, AND FICTIONALIZING

In terms of how they are similar, it would seem that both mindsets are, in the last analysis, dogmatic. Both blind the investigator to certain possibilities, limit exploration, and thus countenance ignorance on his or her part. Paul Lample explains that “[a]lthough we are created to fly, our first reaction

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16 For Rousseau, humans are naturally sympathetic creatures, but society has made us unnaturally selfish, needy, and socially ill. His *On the Social Contract* was an attempt to articulate how humanity could flourish individually and collectively in a condition where there was no going back to nature.

is to remain inert, avoiding the difficulties this exertion implies” (6). He states further that “the community becomes like a population of birds, left to flutter about under a canopy of wire. The canopy, in this case, is woven from the limitations imposed by our consciousness.” Both habits of mind are forms of consciousness that impose such limitations, that function as canopies.

In the case of totalism, these limitations were Karl Popper’s main theme in his two-volume opus *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, which was primarily concerned with criticizing ideologies that champion the whole over the parts. Whether stemming from the theories of Plato, Hegel, or Marx, according to Popper, such ideologies curtail open inquiry, the stimulation of challenging insights, and the capacity to falsify the assumedly essential.

Maybe the difference is that, whereas both totalism and fragmentism invariably result in myopia, the former, in the form of ideology, like Kuhn’s paradigm, at least provides intelligible criteria for grasping reality (though the criteria may be limited and/or distorted). Fragmentism in the form of piecemeal dogma, on the other hand, does not. Instead, it leads to haphazard trivialities and to an uncritical acceptance of that which promotes personal autonomy without regard for historical consciousness, societal wisdom, and the potential consequences of certain actions and policies for future generations.

In any event, adherents of both fragmentism and totalism take their

underlying assumptions for granted; they also, to the extent possible, align anomalies with their prevailing expectations, and when they cannot, as discussed above, they do their best to explain them away or to ignore them. Treating anomalies in these ways is achieved through such means as propagandizing, lying, gaslighting, and spreading disinformation; hyperbolizing and boasting; creating and propagating conspiracy theories; rewriting history for personal or tribal gain; cherry-picking facts, developments, or events; and interpreting those facts, developments, or events in line with partisan agendas or personal whims while also downplaying, or even repudiating, the significance of inopportune facts, developments, or events. It is further achieved through projecting, deflecting blame, and playing the victim; praising and rewarding loyalists, discrediting experts, scapegoating, and persecuting dissenters; incessantly repeating reductive, often divisive, slogans and monikers; and cheating, pursuing loopholes, and cynically sowing seeds of doubt regarding well-established processes and institutions. It is also achieved through the fabrication of truths that are then rationalized and reified as their socially constructed origins are unwittingly, or conveniently, forgotten.<sup>17</sup> In such ways, reality is (again, wittingly or not) distorted—even fictionalized—and normalized to suit totalistic or

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17 The extent to which different truths are actually socially constructed is itself a major epistemological issue. See Karlberg; Smith, *Relativity*; and Smith and Karlberg.

fragmented worldviews. The result is dogma, or at least a form of it, and it is inauthentic, to say the least.

#### THE HABITS OF OTHERING AND TRIBALIZING

Finally, in terms of how they work together, the totalistic mindset and the fragmented mindset conjointly lead to the habit of othering. With the totalistic mindset, meaning is often fortified by relying on the fragmented mentality, as discussed above, that there is an “us” versus a “them.” Holist ideologies such as fascism, Nazism, and communism (as manifested under Joseph Stalin), for example, suppress what they consider anomalous or deviant, often horrifically as the last century made clear. Internally they promote homogeneity of thought and highlight the significance of their totalistic worldviews by blatantly distinguishing them from the worldviews of other groups. Some go further and demonize those groups to buttress their own sense of importance, solidarity, and mission, or in an attempt to compensate for their collective feelings of angst or the wounded pride that comes with, say, national disgrace after losing a war.

There are obvious examples from the twentieth century, but this tendency persists today in the form of religious and secular fundamentalism, party politics, and the tribalism that has recently emerged out of identity politics—as Amy Chua and others argue—and that once again beckons, if we are not careful, to autocratic rule, even fascism (or

totalitarianism, as Orwell warned); to a rise in human rights abuses—as Payam Akhavan poignantly observes; and/or to collective exhaustion.<sup>18</sup> At the very least, othering opens the way to populist movements in which piecemeal dogma is conjoined with a basically cult-like devotion to certain personalities in authority and the often fantastical thinking they espouse, notwithstanding the devotees’ personal beliefs about what actually constitutes right and wrong. Again, the contradictions are explained away or simply ignored.

Whatever the impending result, humanity, as explained by the House of Justice, is thereby “gripped by a crisis of identity, as various peoples and groups struggle to define themselves, their place in the world, and how they should act” (18 Jan. 2019). Moreover: “Without a vision of shared identity and common purpose, they fall into competing ideologies and power struggles. Seemingly countless permutations of ‘us’ and ‘them’ define group identities ever more narrowly and in contrast to one another.” The result of “this splintering into divergent interest groups” is a weakening, over time, of “the cohesion of society itself.”

The result is also needless anguish and death as, again, the response to the spread of COVID-19 at the time of writing this essay has made clear: in some countries, instead of containing the pandemic to the extent possible, competing ideologies and power

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18 See also Goldberg; Levitsky and Ziblatt; Mitchell; and Snyder.

struggles have led, on social media and elsewhere, to hyper-partisanship, the fragmentation of politics from science, the misrepresentation and disparagement of scientists, the politicization of well-tested public health solutions, and the propagation of sham solutions and conspiracy theories, all of which has, in turn, produced much greater suffering, consternation, and economic turmoil than was necessary. If anything, the pandemic in such places—combined with other crises fueled by systemic racism, retaliatory politics, media echo chambers, and acerbic, preemptory speech—has disclosed the defects of distress, dissension, degradation, disenchantment, displacement, and despair in all their potency.

PART TWO:  
TOWARDS  
DYNAMIC FREEDOM

INTRODUCTION

Having critically examined the delusional macro habits of mind—those of totalizing and fragmenting reality—which perpetuate the six social defects of being, doing, and associating (distress, dissension, degradation, disenchantment, displacement, and despair), the second part of this essay turns to the constructive task of proposing how to transcend these macro habits and the compulsions, or more specific habits, related to them. As noted at the outset of Part One, the objective is to offer

insights and language that may be of assistance to Bahá'ís and their collaborators who are seeking to contribute to the advancement of relevant discourses as well as to an evolving understanding of how to overcome the forces of totalism and fragmentism that currently inform their areas of service, work, or study.

The main thesis of this part of the essay is that central to such an endeavor is the development of a globally inclusive historical, or narrative, consciousness—understood to be a fundamental element of an evolving unified consciousness of our purpose as human beings—that imbues our lives with meaning while also informing, and being enriched by, the ongoing articulation of narratives at the national, local, and neighborhood levels carried out in a mode of learning. Such historical consciousness, moreover, provides the inspirational context for building our capacities to think and act in accordance with a number of vital interplays—between unity and diversity, the individual and the collective, worship and service, tribulation and progress, moment and time, consistency and flexibility, material reality and spiritual reality, quality and quantity, truth and relativity, subjectivity and objectivity, and science and religion, among others—which are alien to both the totalistic and the fragmented mindsets, and which are essential to the progress of humanity. Of these interplays, for reasons of space, the first three receive sustained attention while the latter eight are briefly introduced.

A related thesis of this part of the essay is that learning to think and act in accordance with these interplays broadens and deepens our narrative consciousness, contributes to the constructive unfolding of the narrative itself while also giving rise to dynamic freedom. This freedom is understood to be an evolving one in which the wealth of possibility latent within each individual and within the community as a whole is dialectically released for the ongoing benefit of all. It recognizes that humans as social beings are intrinsically inter-reliant, that our natural state is one of unity in diversity, and that our natural mode of association is one of collaboration in which every person feels empowered, in line with his or her developing capacity, to materially, intellectually, and spiritually elevate him- or herself along with his or her fellow citizens, family, community, nation, and the world as a whole. As such, dynamic freedom has significant implications for the manner in which speech and authority are practiced, a fundamental aim of which is to build unity while eliciting potential in all its vibrant diversity to more effectively lift us out of our current defective state, contribute to the process of integration, and bring about the oneness of humankind. As noted at the conclusion of this essay, such freedom also has implications for how humanity deals with both shorter- and longer-term crises, such as the coronavirus pandemic and the disease of racism.

#### EMBRACING AN INCLUSIVE HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

One factor exacerbating the fragmented mindset is our increasingly troubled relationship with grand narratives. As discussed below, embracing an inclusive historical consciousness involves confronting this challenge, which has received much attention in recent years.

#### THE CHALLENGE WITH GRAND NARRATIVES

A key thinker in this regard is Jean-François Lyotard, who argues that we have become disillusioned with such narratives, and that this disillusionment defines our postmodern condition. For him, modernism is characterized by the quest for truth and is premised on the belief that we have the ability to progress towards it. More than this, modernism also privileges certain paradigmatic approaches (science, for example) over others. And their dominance is legitimated by what Lyotard terms the *metanarrative* or grand narrative. Metanarratives—such as G.W.F. Hegel’s dialectical progression of Spirit, Karl Marx’s historical materialism and the emancipation of the worker, the narrative of Christian salvation, and the Enlightenment story that humanity is progressing and achieving greater and greater liberty through the application of reason—are encompassing stories that guide us on our journey. They, in other words, provide the totalistic criteria for identifying what in fact

constitutes relevant knowledge, what speaks faithfully about the world and what does not, and in what direction the world is heading.

Yet, as far as Lyotard is concerned, we have moved into a postmodern age now, and fortunately so. Postmodernism, as he sees it, is characterized by an increasing incredulity towards, and ultimately a collapse of, the metanarrative and its role as legitimator. No matter their form, metanarratives no longer inspire confidence in our systems and our approaches to the generation of knowledge. In their stead, we have seen the emergence and diversification of “indifferent, disparate, linguistic practices” (Schroeder 329), that is, of micro-stories that do not appeal to a single grand narrative for legitimacy. Each of these local knowledges has its own logic which can only be viably assessed from within itself. There are, in fact, no objective criteria to which we can turn that transcend these language games—to use Ludwig Wittgenstein’s phrase—to adjudicate between them. The best we can do is to create an environment of mutual tolerance.

Michel Foucault is very much in favor of the demise of metanarratives. He advocates the “*insurrection of subjugated knowledges*” (81, italics original). He is interested in little stories, localized knowledges, knowledges that, in our modernist quest for truth, have been suppressed, trampled on, and disqualified as naive and insufficient to the goals laid out by the more totalizing theories or disciplines that have managed to impose themselves and the

specific aims they propound. Foucault employs his genealogical approach<sup>19</sup> as a means for contributing to the emancipation of local knowledges from such tyranny. In his view, the sciences and social sciences have increasingly operated to normalize and to regulate bodies and populations. They have therefore stifled human potentiality. Thus,

in contrast to the various projects which aim to inscribe knowledges in the hierarchical order of power associated with science, a genealogy should be seen as a kind of attempt to emancipate historical knowledges from that subjection, to render them, that is, capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse. It is based on a reactivating of local knowledges . . . in opposition to the scientific hierarchization of knowledges and the effects intrinsic to their power: this, then, is the project of these disordered and fragmentary genealogies. (85)

In short, Foucault is for diversity of knowledge and is so at the expense of unity of knowledge. For him, unity is uniformity, constraint, and subjugation. Diversity, contrarily, is liberty, and therefore to be promoted and celebrated.

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19 A critical approach to systems of thought that seeks to uncover their contingent historical origins and thus demonstrate that they are not rationally grounded, justified, necessary, or inevitable.



The disenchantment with metanarratives is understandable from the perspective of Foucault's goal to liberate local knowledges—although the value of local knowledges is not so simple, as discussed below. It is also understandable from the perspective that totalistic stories have both engendered and entrenched fragmentation. To take the dominant example in the West, the Enlightenment story's emphasis on reason's supplying the ultimate means by which to progress towards freedom and expel superstition was definitely an advance in humanity's path to maturity. However, as Max Weber and Charles Taylor explain, the Enlightenment story has also proven problematic in that, in its one-sidedness, it has led to the ascendancy of instrumental reason (which is concerned with maximizing the efficiency of means to achieve designated ends) and thus to an increasing disenchantment with the world—to the loss of wonder and to an overriding sense that we are alienated from ourselves, from others, and from the world itself. The attendant rise of scientism, discussed in Part One, is a similar case in point. The idea that science has unparalleled reach arguably informs the thinking of many, and even captures the imagination at times, but it has not prevented fragmentation or the emergence of rival paradigms. In fact, it has occasioned resentment and insurgency instead. The debate over the relationship between science and religion is just one example. Another is the facile skepticism that many harbor towards science, especially when

its findings do not align with political agendas (McIntyre; Oreskes). It would seem that scientism, particularly in its devotion to materialism, both informs collective consciousness and spawns rival, more fringe narratives that would rather see things otherwise.

#### TOWARDS A NEW GRAND NARRATIVE

There are difficulties with this post-modern account. In the first place, there is a tension between, on the one hand, Lyotard's suggestion that with the collapse of grand metanarratives there has been a rise in local knowledges, and, on the other, Foucault's concern that local knowledges have not yet been truly liberated and that they need to be. It could be additionally argued that science is not nearly as fragmented as Lyotard describes, and that, instead, there are some trends in the opposite direction (Schroeder 341). There is, for example, the emergence of cross-disciplinary workgroups that have subsumed disciplinary subgroups; physics is working towards one grand unified theory; and genetics has consolidated many sub-disciplines of biology, while evolutionary theory has provided a relatively stable unifying basis for the discipline. More broadly, some grander narratives continue to inspire confidence among certain groups. They may not be eternally stable, and their philosophical foundations may have to be revisited and refined time and again, but they still equip religious groups, revolutionary movements, and those who champion the notion of

scientific and technological progress with validation for their beliefs. As such, it is probably more accurate to maintain that, in our world today, there is an incoherent muddle of totalizing and fragmented narratives, some of which are grander than others.

Nevertheless, such narratives, no matter how grand, fail to sustain, let alone supply, a unifying, coherent, meaningful, and inspiring vision of our purpose as human beings. Instead, they frequently operate at cross purposes—as partisan politics, tribalism, nationalism, and the penchant to propagate conspiracy theories make abundantly clear—and consequently perpetuate needless conflict, suffering, consternation, and bewilderment among the peoples of the world. Shoghi Effendi's description in a letter dated 11 March 1936 seems just as applicable today as it was then:

Sore-tried and disillusioned, humanity has no doubt lost its orientation, and would seem to have lost as well its faith and hope. It is hovering, unshepherded and visionless, on the brink of disaster. A sense of fatality seems to pervade it. An ever-deepening gloom is settling on its fortunes as she recedes further and further from the outer fringes of the darkest zone of its agitated life and penetrates its very heart. (*World Order*)

There is also the potential problem, as Schroeder points out in his discussion of Nietzsche, that “[t]he past can

tyrannize the present and the future” (135). Put less provocatively, we can apathetically fall into a mode of doing what we have always done just because that is the way we have always done it (including being antagonistic towards each other). But there is another option. As Schroeder goes on to explain, an understanding of history and our place within its unfoldment “can contribute to the enhancement of life and culture.” That is, historical consciousness

can facilitate the understanding of exemplary human beings, challenging the present to think more creatively about the future, and force present actors to think more effectively, discovering necessary means to successfully realize their goals. Historical examples can also motivate self-sacrifice. Hence cultures must learn both to forget and to remember. A culture achieves unity by building on its true strengths and discarding (or compensating for) its weaknesses . . . (135)

Additionally, we might say that cultures need to learn how to learn about themselves—to read reality; to build on strengths; to compensate for gaps; to devise realistic goals and strategies that address them; and, inspired by achievements and noble exemplars from the past, to engage in sacrificial efforts towards the realization of such objectives. But more important than simply learning how to learn is the need to do so in a way that builds unity

amongst all peoples and nations, not just amongst those who belong to the culture itself. Otherwise, the fragmentation persists and, consequently, the defects outlined at the outset of this essay persist.

In other words, the proposition here is that what is needed is an inclusive global narrative that both cultivates and is enriched by a diversity of micronarratives—that is, a unity in diversity of narratives. What is concurrently needed is the ability on our part, even the habit, of situating our pursuits and micronarratives within the context of this global narrative—this evolving worldview of our unfolding collective history. Situating ourselves in this way would resolve the problems Lyotard identified with metanarratives while also defusing the fragmentation that comes with his and Foucault’s little stories.

The Bahá’í Faith offers such an inclusive concept of history.

#### AN INCLUSIVE CONCEPT OF HISTORY

Bahá’ís believe that humanity has purpose and that it is inexorably moving towards its ultimate goal, the acme of its evolutionary process, referred to by the Universal House of Justice as “the hallmark of the age of maturity” (2 Mar. 2013). According to this teleological view of history, humanity has gone through many stages in its maturation process, developing ever-more complex societies that have been organized successively around the family, the tribe, the city-state, and now, most predominantly, the nation-state. The

next natural stage in this evolutionary process is the oneness of humankind, a consummation that will entail a momentous transformation in our current material, social, and spiritual state as a species. The result will in fact be a global commonwealth that “is organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*). As such, it will be a world in which unity and diversity pulsate in dynamic interplay, continuously propelling humanity to ever-evolving heights of material and spiritual prosperity.

Given humanity’s present state of turmoil, Bahá’ís are under no illusion that its path to full maturity will be easy. Currently, humanity is facing what is characterized as its age of adolescence—one with many positive developments, but which is simultaneously fraught with the defects of distress, dissension, degradation, disenchantment, displacement, and despair. It is a painful time, but, as Shoghi Effendi explains, we are “destined to emerge, sooner or later, out of the carnage, agony, and havoc of this great world convulsion” and achieve a world civilization that will “flourish, and perpetuate itself, a civilization with a fullness of life such as the world has never seen nor can as yet conceive” (*Promised Day*).

That we will do so, moreover, is inherent in who we are as a species. Just

as the fruit of a tree is latent within the seed, so the fruit of divine civilization is latent within the reality of humanity. The mandate of each Manifestation of God has, accordingly, been to progressively awaken “humankind to its capacities and responsibilities as the trustee of creation” (*One Common Faith*) and to its evolving potential to effect personal and social transformation and palpably contribute to an ever-advancing civilization. At His appearance, each Manifestation of God brought the teachings necessary to enable humanity to progress to the next stage on the path towards its destined oneness. Now, with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, unprecedented powers and teachings have been released in the world that make it possible to advance towards a state of individual and collective flourishing never enabled under any erstwhile condition. This state, the inevitable oneness of humankind, is in fact “the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*).

Finally, according to this view of history, humanity is being impelled towards its maturity by two interacting processes. One is disintegrative and the other is integrative. Together these processes are giving rise to what the House of Justice describes as “a mixed catalogue of world-shaking tribulations and world-shaping developments [that] keeps humanity concurrently dazed and dazzled” (Riḍván 1998). The integrative process is apparent in developments such as heightened collective awareness of the deteriorating

state of the environment, growing concern for human rights, the efforts of various organizations and individuals to contribute to social and economic development, and technological advancements, including in the form of social media, that facilitate international connections. On this last point, integration has been facilitated by humanity's progressive understanding of natural laws, such as those of electromagnetism, which has enabled the very contraction of the planet to become a defining feature of social reality. The disintegrative process is evident in the splintering of institutions, the demise of social norms, the persistent conflict and violence in all corners of the world, the extreme disparity between the poor and the rich, the intransigence of certain political leaders when dealing with matters of global impact, and the fragmentation, racism, sexism, extremism, alienation, and anxiety that tenaciously burden human consciousness, and which are also exacerbated and legitimized through social media. And while painful, Bahá'ís recognize that the disintegrative process is finally necessary for dismantling and sweeping aside anachronistic and obdurate practices, conventions, ideologies, and habits of mind—such as the habits of totalizing and fragmenting reality—that impede the realization of our true potential.

At the same time, we have an active role to play in determining how long we take to reach our state of maturity and how we get there. We are not simply caught up in the sweep of history,

although the view of history outlined above “underlies every endeavour pursued by the Bahá’í community” (Universal House of Justice, 2 Mar. 2013) to align with the forces of integration. The best way to become so aligned, according to Bahá’ís, is to strive to translate into reality the teachings of the Manifestation of God for this day which are aimed at effecting transformation at both the individual and societal levels—to, as Michael Karlberg puts it, “learn our way forward” (1) and thereby progressively embody the foundational normative truths so essential to achieving a just and flourishing collective life on this planet. In the words of the House of Justice:

Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation is vast. It calls for profound change not only at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society. “Is not the object of every Revelation”, He Himself proclaims, “to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?” The work advancing in every corner of the globe today represents the latest stage of the ongoing Bahá’í endeavour to create the nucleus of the glorious civilization enshrined in His teachings, the building of which is an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale, one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition.

There are no shortcuts, no formulas. Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed. (Riḍván 2010)

In short, the most effective way of translating Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings into reality is to do so in a mode of learning.

#### ADVANCING THE GLOBAL NARRATIVE IN DIVERSITY

At the social level, this mode of learning consists of a process of action, reflection on action, consultation, and study, in which all are invited to participate (Universal House of Justice, 2 Mar. 2013). As Bahá’ís and their collaborators engage in community-building activities devoted to spiritually and morally empowering younger generations, enhancing the devotional life of the community, raising capacity for service, and participating in social and economic development projects and relevant discourses, they turn to the teachings of the Faith and the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and strive to put the teachings and guidance into practice through consistent, systematic action. In doing so, their knowledge is tested, giving rise to meaningful experience, insights, and questions about which approaches work and

what adjustments need to be made to more fruitfully advance the various endeavors of the community-building process. After further reflection and consultation, this new knowledge is again tested in action, generating yet more experience, insights, and questions, which are in turn reflected upon and consulted about in light of the teachings and the evolving guidance. Through this dialectical learning process, the community develops its capacity to overcome obstacles, to make adjustments, to build on strengths, and to create new opportunities for growth consistent with its overarching narrative of humanity's path to maturity. As discussed under the introduction to the interplay between consistency and flexibility below, this process also adds to the complexity of the community's conceptual framework, which both shapes its activities and evolves in response to the resulting experience.

This process of learning also has the reciprocal effect of inspiring further insights into the nature of the core teachings of the Faith—into, for example, what is meant by the oneness of humanity, the inherent nobility of every human being and his or her capacity to contribute to the accumulation of beneficial knowledge, the relationship between unity and justice, and the interplay between material and spiritual reality. It similarly opens up new horizons of shared understanding of the global narrative that is unfolding—of what is required to achieve humanity's destined oneness.

At the same time, because this learning process is taking place all over the world within different cultural settings and social conditions, it fosters the development of micronarratives—at the neighborhood, local, and national levels—which have their own diverse flavors, but which ultimately thrive because they are grounded in the inclusive concept of history itself. That is, these micronarratives derive their core meaning from the global narrative of humanity's progress while also taking on distinctive characteristics germane to their respective settings and the experiences generated there. An analogue is the Bahá'í House of Worship, which, no matter where it is erected, is, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "a centre wherein the spirits are gladdened and the hearts attracted to the Abhá Kingdom" ("Institution" no. 35), but the design of which "harmonize[s] naturally with the local culture and the daily lives of those who . . . gather to pray and meditate therein" (Universal House of Justice, 1 Aug. 2014), while adhering to certain parameters that are universally shared amongst all Houses of Worship. Finally, the global narrative itself is further refined as experience on how to translate the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation into reality is generated at the micro level in all corners of the world and then synthesized and incorporated into the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and shared through other means. The result, again, is a unity in diversity of narrative consciousness of how humanity, in all its assorted richness, is

moving towards its destined oneness.<sup>20</sup>

EMBRACING VITAL INTERPLAYS  
RELATED TO HUMANITY'S  
INHERENT ONENESS

This organic process of learning—framed and nourished by this inclusive historical consciousness, or this global narrative—also enables us to transcend both the macro habits of totalizing and fragmenting reality and by extension the various compulsions that fuel and perpetuate the defects of being, doing, and associating outlined in Part One of this paper. It is proposed here that a central way in which the learning process does so is by building capacity to think and act in accordance with a number of vital interplays directly associated with and inspired by the narrative that humanity is moving towards its inherent oneness; and, further, that thinking and acting in this way reciprocally advances, in conceptual and practical terms, that narrative while also giving rise to a new form of freedom, referred to here as *dynamic freedom*.

There are a number of such interplays, three of which receive attention below, namely, those between unity

and diversity, the individual and the collective, and worship and service. For reasons of space, the interplays between tribulation and progress, moment and time, coherence and flexibility, material reality and spiritual reality, quality and quantity, truth and relativity, subjectivity and objectivity, and science and religion are only briefly introduced.

INTERPLAY ONE:  
UNITY AND DIVERSITY

It is worth noting that the history of metaphysics in the Western tradition is in many ways a history of an effort to try to come to terms with the relationship between unity and diversity, and by extension, eternity and flux. Perhaps the same could also be said of Eastern philosophy, African philosophy, Indigenous philosophy, and others, but for reasons of space, and but for a few allusions, what follows is primarily concerned with Western thought as it relates to the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. Future work on the subject would no doubt do well to correlate the relevant thinking of these various traditions into a more comprehensive understanding of the subject.

*Historical Attempts to Describe the Relationship*

A common point of departure is Parmenides,<sup>21</sup> who argues, on logical

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20 The foregoing is meant simply as an introduction to the dynamic interplay between the global narrative and micro narratives. Future research on the matter would have to account for the fact that the dynamic will vary in accordance with the nature of each micronarrative, how longstanding and culturally entrenched it is, how tied it is to the local workings of power, how initially aligned it is with the global narrative, etcetera.

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21 The following summaries of the pre-Socratic thinkers Parmenides,

grounds, that the world is in reality one and that multiplicity and change are mere illusions. Heraclitus is usually contrasted with Parmenides as the philosopher of flux, famously stating that one cannot step into the same river twice (because it is continually flowing). His conclusion, however, is based on an understanding similar to the Eastern concept of the dynamic relationship between yin and yang. The universe is viewed as an incessant back-and-forth between opposites and is thus in a ceaseless state of tension. But with this tension there is also a harmony, as is the case with the lyre, which functions as a unified instrument because it is being pulled apart and pulled together at the same time. By the same token, while the river is always changing, it is nevertheless the same river. As Anthony Gottlieb puts it, “If there were no rivers, then obviously they could not be full of flux, or indeed full of anything” (51). Instead, “flux and stability, unity and diversity are themselves two sides of the same coin, like night and day” (49). For Heraclitus, in other words, unity and diversity are essential to each other.

Other classical Greek philosophers offer different solutions to the same question. Democritus, for example, ascribes eternity to an infinity of atoms, and flux to the ephemeral variations in their combinations. Empedocles posits the four elements of fire, water, earth, and air, which for him are eternal, and

like Democritus, attributes plurality to their temporary amalgamations. And then of course there is Plato, who attempts to reconcile the idea of oneness/eternity with the idea of diversity/flux by assigning the former to the world of the Forms or Ideas and the latter to the world of the senses. He thus sees two worlds. The latter, and lesser of the two, is the material world, the world of transient things, shadows, and common opinion. It concerns him only insofar as it can entrap us and prevent us from pursuing our main objective in life, which is to uncover the secrets of the real world—the realm of the Forms. This, for him, is the world of independent, universal, eternal realities, a world unspoiled by ephemerality. Instead, it consists of changeless, perfect Ideas (e.g., the perfect good, justice, tree, horse, bed, color yellow, triangle), of which every corresponding material particular is simply a deficient emulation.

More recently, Baruch Spinoza theorizes, on rigorous logical grounds, the existence of a universal, self-sufficient substance which he refers to interchangeably as Nature and God. This substance, he maintains, has limitless attributes of which only two are perceptible to humans: extension and thought. This is his way of resolving the interaction problem that René Descartes had set up between the two fundamental substances of body (extension) and mind (thought). That is, Spinoza answers the problem of how these substances interact by ostensibly dissolving the problem. For him, body

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Heraclitus, Democritus, and Empedocles are based on Anthony Gottlieb's book *The Dream of Reason*.



and mind are actually one substance conceived by human beings in two different ways.

Another relevant philosopher is Arthur Schopenhauer. Following in the footsteps of Immanuel Kant, and inspired by Plato, he posits two worlds which he calls the “noumenal realm” and the “phenomenal realm.” The former consists of a single entity or principle he labels the Will—a universal, impersonal, purposeless striving—which is not accessible to the senses. What we perceive instead is the world of phenomena, which is the Will manifested to human consciousness. As with Kant, it is also a world of illusion, a derivative world, because it is shaped by the categories of space, time, and causality, all of which are native to the human mind. With these concepts serving as its lens, the mind thus breaks up what is essentially one reality. But Schopenhauer also goes a step beyond Kant by maintaining that we can tap into the noumenal realm, or the Will. Because the Will is all there really is, each of us is also this Will. We can, therefore, get some idea of what it is by looking inward and tapping into our own willing.

Importantly, Schopenhauer draws ethical implications from his metaphysics. Because we all are the Will and are all, therefore, one, hurting others entails hurting ourselves. Thus, the good person looks beyond the illusion of differentiation and embraces his or her underlying oneness with others. This is the basis of morality and the supreme argument for showing compassion

towards fellow human beings. The optimal social condition is one in which humans are considerate towards one another, sharing in each other’s joys and sufferings. While not directly inspired by Eastern thought when first writing his philosophy, Schopenhauer soon found that his views resonated, for example, with the Hindu concept that that which is essential to each of us, the Atman, is united with the absolute principle of existence, or Brahman.

Henri Bergson is also concerned with the problem of fragmentation and that which underpins it. He focuses specifically on the concept of time. While he respects empirical science and its practical applications, he notes that the scientific approach is selective, quantitative, and pragmatic, and that it artificially organizes reality in a way that detracts from the richness and possibilities associated with its underlying continuity. Specifically, science, with its emphasis on empiricism and measurement, breaks time up into discrete moments which do not do justice to the lived experience, or essence, of time. Time, as accessed through intuition, has the quality of “duration.” It is an interlacing of past, present, and future, and is thus an indivisible process that is always coming into being, with the present and future increasingly imbued by the past.

Bergson also identifies this flow of time with life itself—a productive force that permeates and pulses through everything in the world and creatively drives the evolutionary process. He calls this life force the “*élan vital*,”

and contrasts it with the compulsion to block innovation and to standardize. As with Schopenhauer, Bergson's metaphysics thus has ramifications for how we orient ourselves towards each other. Specifically, he draws a distinction between what he calls open and closed morality (Schroeder 111). The latter is dogmatic, conservative, and exclusive. It is rooted in the traditions of a population and perpetuates the notion that some belong while others do not. Open morality, by contrast, stems from the *élan vital*. It is inclusive, exploratory, and vibrant in that it responds and adjusts to new evolutionary prospects, complexities, and situations. It embraces otherness and reaches towards novel possibilities.

Finally, Bergson's approach aligns with David Bohm's observation that, while fragmentation can have practical benefits for certain purposes, when generalized, it estranges humanity from its inherent oneness. The fragmented world comes to be seen as the real world, although it is simply a human construction that we have ended up reifying. The organic oneness and flow of reality is thus obscured. The following passage is indicative of Bohm's perspective:

[S]ome might say: "Fragmentation of cities, religions, political systems, conflict in the form of wars, general violence, fratricide, etc., are the reality. Wholeness is only an ideal, toward which we should perhaps strive." But this is not what is being said here.

Rather, what should be said is that wholeness is the real, and that fragmentation is the response of this whole to man's action, guided by illusory perception, which is shaped by fragmentary thought. In other words, it is just because reality is whole that man, with his fragmentary approach, will inevitably be answered with a correspondingly fragmentary response. So what is needed is for man to give attention to his habit of fragmentary thought, to be aware of it, and thus bring it to an end. Man's approach to reality may then be whole, and so the response will be whole.

Otherwise put, fragmentation breeds more fragmentation, and the only way out is to cling to the underlying oneness of reality and to keep this ontological premise at the forefront of our thinking at all times and under all conditions. Doing so involves overcoming, as observed in Part One, habits of mind that promote reductionism, false dichotomies, formulaic thinking, and discrete pursuits at the expense of processes. It involves, in Charles Taylor's words, "see[ing] ourselves as part of a larger order that can make claims on us" (89).

### *Proposed Account*

There is much here that correlates with the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith; the same holds for the ideas of many other thinkers such as various Stoic

philosophers, Plotinus, Nietzsche, Emmanuel Levinas, and so on, who are not covered here owing to considerations of space. Yet, it is proposed that to truly surmount the macro habits of totalizing and fragmenting reality, all of the compulsions related to them, and the defects of being, doing, and associating that they perpetuate, we need to go further than what these thinkers offer. Specifically, surmounting these habits requires building the capacity—through the organic learning process of action, reflection, consultation, and study—to think and act in accordance with the dynamic interplay between unity and diversity. It thus means progressively learning to embrace and manifest the following interrelated ontological assumptions which are central features of the inclusive, global narrative outlined above.

The first principle is that humanity is inherently one, the oneness of which reflects the oneness of reality, which in turn is dependent on the oneness of God, Who, being the All-Powerful and independent of His creation, created reality and humanity as one. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “every part of the universe is connected with every other part by ties that are very powerful and admit of no imbalance, nor any slackening whatever” (*Selections* 137:2). He also states that “all things are involved in all things” (*Promulgation*), and that “all created things are connected one to another by a linkage complete and perfect” (*Selections* 21:6). Similarly, Shoghi Effendi states that “Man is organic with the world” (qtd. in Office of

Social and Economic Development). Nothing is autonomous except God. Instead, while God is self-sufficiently One, all created things are one by virtue of their interdependence, which was ordained by Him.

Second—whereas Schopenhauer refers to Will, Bergson to the *élan vital*, and Nietzsche, it might be added, to the will to power—the essential dynamic in the universe is love, which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes as a unifying, purposeful force that permeates everything from the material to the social to the spiritual. He states:

Love is the most great law that ruleth this mighty and heavenly cycle, the unique power that bindeth together the divers elements of this material world, the supreme magnetic force that directeth the movements of the spheres in the celestial realms. Love revealeth with unflinching and limitless power the mysteries latent in the universe. Love is the spirit of life unto the adorned body of mankind, the establisher of true civilization in this mortal world, and the shedder of imperishable glory upon every high-aiming race and nation. (*Selections* 12:1)

With this principle as our ontological grounding, compassion is no longer simply rooted in the logic that hurting others means hurting ourselves. Compassion is rather rooted in the conviction that reality is organically one and that it has coursing through it the magnetic and vitalizing force of love.

Such an understanding demands that we “[s]trive to become the manifestations of the love of God, the lamps of divine guidance shining amongst the kindreds of the earth with the light of love and concord” (12:3). “For,” as the Universal House of Justice asks, “is it not love for God that burns away all veils of estrangement and division and binds hearts together in perfect unity? Is it not His love that spurs you on in the field of service and enables you to see in every soul the capacity to know Him and to worship Him?” (Riḍván 2010). In the same vein, we might ask: Is it not such love that breaks down mental and social barriers and thus releases the possibilities for mutual advancement? As the House of Justice also explains in its letter regarding racial prejudice in the United States:

Ultimately, the power to transform the world is effected by love, love originating from the relationship with the divine, love ablaze among members of a community, love extended without restriction to every human being. This divine love, ignited by the Word of God, is disseminated by enkindled souls through intimate conversations that create new susceptibilities in human hearts, open minds to moral persuasion, and loosen the hold of biased norms and social systems so that they can gradually take on a new form in keeping with the requirements of humanity’s age of maturity. (22 July 2020)

Third, and directly on point, unity and diversity are fundamental to each other in the human realm. Diversity is not simply a matter of fragmentation, although when divorced from unity, it becomes so: without unity, diversity invariably lapses into the alienation, conflict, and oppression that come with fragmentism. Reciprocally, unity without diversity invariably lapses into the homogeneity, normalization, and oppression that come with totalism. True unity is alive with diversity. It is contrary to uniformity, which is stale, lifeless. The relationship between unity and diversity, therefore, is dialectical: each only truly flourishes when in dynamic interplay with the other. A familiar, helpful analogy is that of the human body:

Human society is composed not of a mass of merely differentiated cells but of associations of individuals, each one of whom is endowed with intelligence and will; nevertheless, the modes of operation that characterize man’s biological nature illustrate fundamental principles of existence. Chief among these is that of unity in diversity. Paradoxically, it is precisely the wholeness and complexity of the order constituting the human body—and the perfect integration into it of the body’s cells—that permit the full realization of the distinctive capacities inherent in each of these component elements. No cell lives apart from the body, whether in

contributing to its functioning or in deriving its share from the well-being of the whole. (Bahá'í International Community, *Prosperity*)

### *Emphasis on Dynamic Organicism*

It is important to point out here that others have used organic metaphors such as the human body to understand society. Well-known examples are Plato, Edmund Burke, Johann Gottfried von Herder, Herbert Spencer (*Offer*), and Émile Durkheim. Hegel takes an organicist view of society as well, as do others who propound more insidious collectivist political ideologies such as fascism. Such ideologies, however, often use the analogy in a way to justify the elevation of the state over the individual where the individual is considered practically irrelevant to, or viewed as a pawn of, society. The “cell” is only significant insofar as it plays its assigned function—a manifestation of totalism. Contrarily, those who reject the analogy of the body tend towards the opposite pole. Society, for them, is not much more than a collection of atoms. The cult of individualism prevails—a manifestation of fragmentism.

Bahá'u'lláh shares neither of these totalistic or fragmented orientations. Instead, one could argue that He espouses a dynamic reciprocity between the whole and its parts. This view can be termed a *dynamic organicism*, which will be employed in this article to differentiate it from organic metaphors used to justify more conservative

or totalistic ideologies.<sup>22</sup> In this view of organicism, the individual is a trust of society with certain rights and freedoms that must be assured. But society does not lose by providing in this way. Instead, by nourishing its diverse “cells,” it, in effect, nourishes itself. By imbuing the individual with certain liberties, society enables the individual to contribute, in his or her own unique way, to the well-being of the whole. In this manner, an otherwise moribund body exudes increasing vitality. But it does so, again, only insofar as the creative potential it liberates is realized in service to its evolving oneness, which is the ultimate commonweal. The same relationship holds between humankind and different cultures. That is:

Much like the role played by the gene pool in the biological life of humankind and its environment, the immense wealth of cultural diversity achieved over thousands of years is vital to the social and economic development of a human race experiencing its collective coming-of-age. It represents a heritage that must be permitted to bear its fruit in a global

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22 The term “organic” is used often in the writings of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice. The claim here is that this term is employed by them in quite a different manner from, say, how someone like Edmund Burke employs it, let alone how it is employed by fascists. In this essay, “dynamic” is added to emphasize the distinction.

civilization. (Bahá'í International Community)

In short, unity without diversity is uniformity, lifelessness, subjugation. Diversity without unity is invariably ineffectual and even perilous to both the collective and, consequently (and ironically), the individual. Hence the principle of unity in diversity.

Learning to embrace this principle, moreover, is key to learning to embrace the second interplay, just alluded to, between the individual and the collective. As with the first interplay, this interplay is linked with the inclusive concept of history. As such, by developing our capacity to think and act in accordance with it, we are better able to contribute to this same global narrative, overcome totalism and fragmentation, and move towards dynamic freedom.

#### INTERPLAY TWO: THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COLLECTIVE

As discussed, no cell of the body can flourish on its own. Instead, the cells (and organs) are bound together in common purpose and are mutually enlivening. It follows—borrowing a theme from Hegel—that if we are to achieve our true potential as individuals and as a community, the only workable option is to “inter-be” (Fox 47). Given the interdependence between being and doing, it might be added that to inter-be means to also inter-do. In fact, given the centrality of the generation

of knowledge for the progress of humanity, it could be further added that to inter-be and -do means to also inter-know. As discussed in this section, the implications for freedom of speech are also profound.

#### *Qualities of Organic Bodies*<sup>23</sup>

To explain, any organic body is characterized by a number of related qualities. One is the quality of emergence, the notion that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This phenomenon is readily observable in nature, where properties emerge that do not exist at the level of the parts themselves. The property of sight, for example, only exists by virtue of a specific combination and chemistry between particular biological components.

The same phenomenon holds for human communities. Where the emphasis is on individual autonomy and self-expression for their own sake, or for personal advancement at the expense of others, the whole becomes little more than the sum of its parts. In fact, we could argue that the whole ends up even less than the sum of its parts not only because the whole is fragmented (it has no combinational chemistry), but also because, as discussed in Part One, many of its individual members feel disempowered and aimless within such an environment. Conversely, the

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23 This section is partly inspired by some of the content that has been covered at graduate seminars of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity; see [www.globalprosperity.org](http://www.globalprosperity.org).

quality of emergence is realized when cooperation and reciprocity become the norm—when the individuals that compose a community are oriented towards spiritually, intellectually, and materially enriching one another and contributing to the betterment of the whole.

There are at least two reasons for this effect. First, as discussed in relationship to Taylor’s insights in Part One of this essay, freedom of choice and expression means very little in the absence of a shared horizon of meaning. Second, as also covered in Part One, the tendency within atomistic societies, for all their talk of tolerance, is for individuals and subgroups to subvert one another. In an environment where some achieve at the expense of others, many settle for mediocrity or become resentful and blinded to their own possibilities. Moreover, even those who dominate are effectively diminished, though they may not realize it given the piecemeal dogma that constrains their consciousness; because of the basic organic relationship among all members of society, by diminishing others, they effectively diminish themselves.

This point raises another quality of organic bodies, which is that they enable the parts themselves to flourish, thereby achieving levels of creative expression the parts could never achieve on their own. This is a common theme found in the writings of the Bahá’í Faith. The Universal House of Justice, for example, draws attention to the importance of “individual initiatives and collective endeavours” being woven

together “into an effective pattern of unified action” (Riḍván 2007). A major reason for this is that “[t]he power of action is unlocked at the level of individual initiative and surges at the level of collective volition” (19 May 1994). As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains:

Whensoever holy souls, drawing on the powers of heaven, shall arise with such qualities of the spirit, and march in unison, rank on rank, every one of those souls will be even as one thousand, and the surging waves of that mighty ocean will be even as the battalions of the Concourse on high. What a blessing that will be—when all shall come together, even as once separate torrents, rivers and streams, running brooks and single drops, when collected together in one place will form a mighty sea. (*Selections* 207:3)

In other words, while the whole is more than the sum of its parts, the parts themselves, in a dynamic-organic community, transcend their own limitations as individuals. Their powers are transformed and exponentially magnified as they collaborate towards the achievement of commonly determined objectives.

Drawing on Fox’s discussion of Hegel (45), one metaphor that may be helpful here is that of the formation of water. Separate from each other, hydrogen and oxygen play particular roles. These roles are important and not to be diminished. But this is not necessarily

all they are. When they are combined in the right proportion, the two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen produce a greater whole, that is, water. This quantitative and combinational change leads to a qualitative change at the collective level. Here, water is the emergent quality—the whole which is greater than the sum of its three parts. But this quantitative change leads to qualitative changes at the atomic, individual level, as well. The parts are still present, but they are transformed, now manifesting previously unforeseen powers that would not exist were they to remain separate from each other.

But this metaphor is insufficient when thinking of the powers of organic bodies, because water in itself can never be more than water, although it can take the form of a solid, liquid, or gas. This raises yet a third quality of organic social bodies, which is that the dynamic relationship between the parts and the whole leads to an ongoing process of mutual transformation similar to the learning process described above. Through collaboration and reciprocity, the parts give rise to emergent properties at the level of the whole. This in turn has transformative implications for the individual parts in that it enables a heightened potential for flourishing at that level. Moreover, as this new potential is released amongst individuals, and developed and canalized into unified action, it generates further qualities at the collective level that build on, but outstrip, previous states of collective emergence. This dynamic social state, in turn, stimulates

a further release of potential at the individual level, which again surges at the level of collective volition, giving rise to yet another, more advanced, manifestation of collective functioning. In other words, the process of individual and collective transformation is dialectically progressive. It can even lead to transformative leaps in the expression of human and social potentialities along the continuum of progress in the way that a plant's blossoming qualitatively surpasses its budding, and its fructification qualitatively surpasses its blossoming (Fox 44).

### *Mutual Transformation*

Again, this dialectic is only possible in the case of a dynamic-organic mode of functioning as the term is being employed here. We see this mode, for example, in Bahá'í administration as the recent experience with the development of agencies at regional and local levels makes clear. The House of Justice states: "Even as a living organism, [Bahá'í administration] has coded within it the capacity to accommodate higher and higher degrees of complexity, in terms of structures and processes, relationships and activities, as it evolves under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice" (Ridván 2010). On the other hand, within a purely fragmented mode, neither individual nor social transformation is possible, at least not in any sustainable and mutually beneficial way. In a more totalistic, or mechanical, mode, one could make the case for emergence:



analogously, the clock is greater than the sum of its parts. But within this mode, the parts remain what they are and the whole remains what it is—until they atrophy. Progressive transformation is not an option in a totalistic mode. It is only when a community operates in a dynamic-organic mode that both the individual and the collective can truly advance together.

This advance is possible because, on the one hand, within such a community, “the circle of participation” is “[thrown] wide open” (5 Dec. 2013), and “the constructive contributions” (Ridván 2010) of all are welcomed. In fact, the community thus allows “‘free scope’ for ‘individuality to assert itself’ through modes of spontaneity, initiative and diversity” since this ensures its viability (29 Dec. 1988). An animated diversity is necessary if the community is to thrive in unity rather than languish in lifeless uniformity. On the other hand, and as discussed under the first interplay, diversity itself only blooms when it is grounded in unity. Individual flourishing, in its truest sense, can only be achieved through mutuality. As quoted above: “Paradoxically, it is precisely the wholeness and complexity of the order constituting the human body . . . that permit the full realization of the distinctive capacities inherent in each of these component elements.” Each vivifies the other so long as each is vigorously responsive to the other. Their interdependence therefore also requires that the powers of individuals be expressed “responsibly in accordance with the common weal”

(Universal House of Justice, 2 Mar. 2013). In short, progress is achieved when the community serves as an “environment in which individual effort and collective action . . . complement each other” (Ridván 2008), in which, moreover, “all consider themselves as treading a common path of service—supporting one another and advancing together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment . . .” (Ridván 2010).

### *Freedom of Speech*

Such an environment also has implications for how we speak to one another—another key element of dynamic freedom and the dynamic interplay between the individual and the collective. To explain, the macro habits of both totalizing and fragmenting reality lead to the impoverishment of speech, rendering it shallow and ultimately harmful. Owing to these deleterious macro habits of mind, speech today is often reactive, aggressive, incendiary, motivated by the compulsion to belittle and blame, and regularly suffused with sarcasm, hyperbole, or outright lies. In the name of “telling it like it is,” it “employs a style of expression which robs language of its decorum” (Universal House of Justice, 19 May 1994). Moreover, “in a time when stridency is commonly presumed to be a quality of leadership, candor is crass, and authority speaks in a loud and vulgar voice.” Such speech, furthermore, often cajoles both the inciter and the listener into adopting limited, skewed, and

sometimes utterly deranged views of reality, and rationalizes tribalism, conflict, and hostility using diverse spaces and media to accomplish its ends. This, it is suggested, is not true free speech because it estranges, oppresses, and dampens mutual learning and collective flourishing.

Specifically, totalism leads to tendentious discourse by lacing it with ideological rigidity through the circulation of disingenuous propaganda. It distorts truth in line with vested interests through the manipulation of language, the fudging or recasting of history, the deployment of assorted diversionary tactics, and the diminishment or dehumanization of “others.” Fragmentism similarly degrades speech through crudeness, spiteful partisan positioning, and the incessant promulgation of various forms of reductionism, such as insulting nicknames and simple-minded, yet provocative, pronouncements. Both are anti-invitational; both needlessly divide; both suppress genuine expression.

Speech associated with dynamic freedom, on the other hand, is invitational, courteous, and humble, but also honest, forthright, and intent on grappling with facts and facing reality, scientific and otherwise, in all its complexity. As such, it attracts rather than polarizes. It uplifts rather than debilitates. It finds points of unity<sup>24</sup> whenever

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24 In this regard, the House of Justice states: “whether through deeds or words, the merit of your every contribution to social well-being lies, first, in your resolute commitment to discover that precious

er possible and empowers each participant in a discourse to detach from his or her ideas in the face of countervailing evidence and jettison perspectives that are demonstrably false.

Bahá'u'lláh states: “A kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit, it clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding” (*Gleanings* 132:5). He also states:

Every word is endowed with a spirit, therefore the speaker or expounder should carefully deliver his words at the appropriate time and place, for the impression which each word maketh is clearly evident and perceptible. The Great Being saith: One word may be likened unto fire, another unto light, and the influence which both exert is manifest in the world. Therefore an enlightened man of wisdom should primarily speak with words as mild as milk, that the children of men may be nurtured and edified thereby and may attain the ultimate goal of human existence which is the station of true understanding and nobility. (*Tablets* 11:30)

The concept of speaking with words mild as milk is, ironically, a powerful one, as is the notion that each word is endowed with a spirit. In line with the

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point of unity where contrasting perspectives overlap and around which contending peoples can coalesce” (25 Nov. 2020).

interplays between unity and diversity, the individual and the collective, and the next one, worship and service, it could be extrapolated from this notion that in order to exert proper influence, we need to speak and write in a manner that conveys a longing to learn alongside one another, that mistakes are okay, that everyone has the potential to contribute, and that the solution to an issue can rarely be resolved in dichotomous or reductive terms. At the very least, it seems that such speech requires moderation, courtesy, which is “the prince of virtues” (*Tablets* 7:14), and humility, for as Bahá’u’lláh warns, “[h]umility exalteth man to the heaven of glory and power, whilst pride abaseth him to the depths of wretchedness and degradation” (6). In this regard, Bahá’ís are exhorted by the House of Justice to “look to the lofty standards of the Cause to guide them at all times in the way they express themselves” (1 Dec. 2019). They are also reminded that speech’s effects are determined by such “critical factors” as “[c]ontent, volume, style, tact, wisdom, [and] timeliness,” and that it must, therefore, be exercised judiciously with the aim of “giv[ing] birth to an etiquette of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race” (29 Dec. 1988).

Lastly, it bears mentioning that by speaking in this way, insights would certainly be challenged and theories revised, but now they would be so because everyone would be encouraged to recognize legitimate anomalies and thus see beyond their own limited

perspectives in their longing to discover truth. Moreover, a learning mode would be fostered in which gaps in understanding would be seen in light of strengths, points of unity would form the foundations of continued explorations, and all would feel that their “God-given talents and capacities” (Universal House of Justice, 28 July 2008) were not only being tapped and expressed in service, but that they were also directly contributing to the global narrative of humanity’s journey—and, indeed, to the journey itself—towards the embodiment of its inherent oneness.

### INTERPLAY THREE: WORSHIP AND SERVICE

As discussed in Part One, one of the main preoccupations of the habit to fragment, to atomize, or to individualize, is that of identity, or the individual’s having the space and the means to discover his or her diverse, authentic self, to be recognized as such, and to be able to celebrate it. This contrasts with the totalistic outlook in which the individual’s identity is basically prescribed by the whole. As also discussed, both outlooks are ultimately wanting, even counterproductive; both undermine true freedom. Contrarily, it is suggested that, along with the interplays between unity and diversity and the individual and the collective, dynamic freedom and the capacity to participate in the unfolding of the global narrative entails 1) discovering and nurturing the essence of God’s light within oneself, thereby achieving reunion with the

Eternal; and 2) releasing one's unique potential to promote individual and collective prosperity. That is, dynamic freedom advances through attending to the "organic unity of the inner and outer realities of human life" (Universal House of Justice, 29 Dec. 1988) and, thus, the dynamic interplay between worship and service.

### *Nobility and Submission*

In addition to the ontological assumption that humanity is one, this interplay flows from the related belief that every human being is essentially noble and has the capacity to reflect the attributes of God. Bahá'u'lláh states: "From among all created things [God] hath singled out for His special favor the pure, the gem-like reality of man, and invested it with a unique capacity of knowing Him and of reflecting the greatness of His glory" (*Gleanings* 34:1). "Upon the reality of man," moreover, God "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 favour, so enduring a bounty" (27:2). Our task is to blot out the dross from the face of our mirrors, especially at this critical time in history.

Essential to this task is submission to the will of God, which involves obeying His commandments and worshipping Him. This is a perennial theme that deserves much greater attention than can be offered here. Suffice it to say that it comprises recognizing His

laws as essential to human advancement, to collective understanding, and to refining our conduct towards each other. While such laws obviously constrain action, they simultaneously create the conditions in which we can exercise true freedom by preventing us from succumbing to our baser instincts—a form of ignorance and imprisonment we otherwise inflict upon ourselves. As the House of Justice explains:

Expounding the theme of liberty, Bahá'u'lláh asserted that "the embodiment of liberty and its symbol is the animal"; that "liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station"; that "true liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments." "We approve of liberty in certain circumstances," He declared, "and refuse to sanction it in others." But He gave the assurance that, "Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty." (29 Dec. 1988)

Similarly, communing with God is essential to the task of purging the dross. The following passage from a letter dated 18 December 2014 from the House of Justice captures the essence of prayer and its power to purify the spirit and unite us with our Maker:

The Twin Luminaries of this resplendent age have taught us this: Prayer is the essential spiritual conversation of the soul with its Maker, direct and without intermediation. It is the spiritual food that sustains the life of the spirit. Like the morning's dew, it brings freshness to the heart and cleanses it, purifying it from attachments of the insistent self. It is a fire that burns away the veils and a light that leads to the ocean of reunion with the Almighty. On its wings does the soul soar in the heavens of God and draw closer to the divine reality. Upon its quality depend the development of the limitless capacities of the soul and the attraction of the bounties of God . . . ("Institution" no. 67)

The letter also stresses the importance of prayer for service, stating that the sweetness of the melodies of such prayer "must gladden and uplift the heart and reinforce the penetrating power of the Word, transmuting earthly inclinations into heavenly attributes and inspiring selfless service to humankind." Similarly, in another letter the House of Justice draws attention to "the dynamic interaction between worship and endeavours to uplift the spiritual, social, and material conditions of society" (1 Aug. 2014). Both, moreover, are essential to achieving nearness to God, which, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "is possible through devotion to Him, through entrance into the Kingdom and service

to humanity" (*Promulgation*). They are also jointly integral to the life of the community, for as the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice explains,

as essential as is a vibrant devotional life to one's spiritual development, worship must also result, the House of Justice notes, in "deeds that give outward expression to that inner transformation". Shoghi Effendi points out that the "very purpose" of the community—a community that is "divinely ordained, organically united, clear-visioned, vibrant with life"—is "regulated by the twin directing principles of the worship of God and of service to one's fellow-men". Indeed, the indispensable connection between these directing principles is integral to the oneness of humankind, which, as the House of Justice notes, "is at once the operating principle and ultimate goal" of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. ("Institution")

### *The Centrality of Relationships*

One way to understand the significance of the interplay between worship and service is to draw attention once again to the interdependence of human beings. While prayer is essential for personal sanctification and development, the individual's capacity to acquire the attributes of God also depends on the quality of his or her relationships with others since we are

organically one with our fellow human beings. As Matthew Weinberg explains, “[t]he self . . . cannot evolve outside of human relationships. Indeed, the self develops through endeavours that are participatory in nature. Virtues such as generosity, loyalty, mercy, and self-abnegation cannot be manifested in isolation from others.”

The aim of such relationships, moreover, is true friendship, which requires being free of prejudicial thoughts, seeing in others their fundamental nobility and unique capacities, and perceiving all relationships as progressing within, contributing to, and being nourished by the evolving matrix of relationships that make up the community as a whole. It requires taking the following words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to heart: “Let them purify their sight and behold all humankind as leaves and blossoms and fruits of the tree of being. Let them at all times concern themselves with doing a kindly thing for one of their fellows, offering to someone love, consideration, thoughtful help . . . staying free of prejudice, drawing no lines” (*Selections* 1:2). When so purified, the individual’s constant aspiration is to serve in a community that itself has become a “spiritually charged arena” (Universal House of Justice, 28 Dec. 2010) in which individuals, through their worshipful devotion to God, “consign their own selves to oblivion, strip from themselves the defects of humankind, and unchain themselves from human bondage” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 84:5).

As always, it is instructive to draw

correlations with the insights of different thinkers. Certain French feminist philosophers, for instance, have much to say about the importance of serving or uplifting others, although they may lay greater stress on individual authenticity and ignore the devotional attitude. One such thinker is Luce Irigaray, for whom the celebration of differences is a vital principle. According to her, for one to deny the capacities and differences of others is to diminish them as well as oneself. Such denial deprives one of the opportunity to challenge one’s perceptions and identity, and thus of the chance to expand one’s consciousness and enhance one’s understanding. As Schroeder explains her position, “[t]he proper relation to other people is wonder—awe at their distinctiveness and specificity” (314). One, therefore, should aim to nurture, energize, and uplift others, rather than to possess or dominate them.

Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir’s “ideal is a collaborative society in which everyone helps each other transcend oppression and the limitations of their situations, in which each is stimulated by the achievements of others. This requires reciprocal recognition” (Schroeder 302). In Beauvoir’s own words, “only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening in the absurdity of facticity” (*Ethics*), that is, from becoming thing-like, objectified, reified—from becoming mechanical. Thus, for Beauvoir, there is no true freedom for any individual or group unless all individuals or groups are free—unless there is joint freedom,

one based on reciprocal empowerment. Her conclusions resonate with Axel Honneth's emphasis on social freedom, and his contention that in order for human potential to be fully released, both the individual and the collective must be emancipated and the contributions that each individual makes to the common good must be cultivated. They also correlate with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's observation that "[the] stronger the ties of fellowship and solidarity amongst men, the greater will be the power of constructiveness and accomplishment in all the planes of human activity" (*Promulgation*). Egoism, let alone egotism, undermines itself by depriving the self and others of collective progress. Service, on the other hand, nourishes both self and others concurrently. Even more, when combined with worship, it leads to the repudiation of otherness qua otherness. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá admonishes, "Cleanse ye your eyes, so that ye behold no man as different from yourselves. See ye no strangers; rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness" (*Selections* 8:7). And, as observed above, it is through prayer that such cleansing is achieved.

#### COMPLEMENTARY INTERPLAYS

There are a number of other interplays associated with dynamic freedom. As with the interplays between unity and diversity, the individual and the collective, and worship and service, it is suggested that building capacity to think and act in accordance with these

interplays is consistent with, and fundamental to advancing, both conceptually and practically, the inclusive, global narrative of humanity's development towards maturity. Among them are the following interplays, which are briefly introduced as potential points of departure for further inquiry elsewhere.<sup>25</sup>

#### *Tribulation and Progress (Crisis and Victory)*

The essential aim of thinkers such as the Stoics and Nietzsche is to cultivate those values that promote the enhancement of life, fortify human capacities, and enable individuals to constantly excel notwithstanding the obstacles in their path. They believe in affirming life and view challenges as "a permanent stimulus to improvement" (Schroeder 144). Nietzsche, for example, would doubtless agree with 'Abdu'l-Bahá when He states, "The weeping of the cloud giveth rise to the smile of the rose, and the crash of thunder maketh way for the warbling of the nightingale. The intensity of the cold bringeth on the beauty of the bloom and the

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25 Given the space, even more interplays could be introduced, some of which are directly related to the ones discussed in this paper. These include those between women and men (related to the interplay between unity and diversity), expansion and consolidation (related to the interplay between consistency and flexibility), centralization and decentralization (also related to the interplay between consistency and flexibility), means and ends, and excellence and moderation, among many others.

chilling rain adorneth the garden with blossoms of every hue” (quoted in Universal House of Justice, 18 Mar. 2009). But more than this is the conviction that without tribulation life is actually joyless and meaningless. By fully aligning ourselves with the will of God, we find comfort, even delight, in the crises we face knowing that victories will be forthcoming as a consequence, and that these, in turn, will give rise to further tests and opportunities for growth. The idea, it seems, is that without such tribulations there can be no sustained rejoicing—only fragility and a fundamental bereavement. The following reflection of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá upon His sudden liberation from oppression is a poignant reminder of this basic truth: “My only joy in this swiftly passing world was to tread the stony path of God and to endure hard tests and all material griefs. For otherwise, this earthly life would prove barren and vain, and better would be death” (*Selections* 190:10).

### *Moment and Time*

It is often held that we should live in the present and not worry so much about the past and the future. There is definitely some truth to this view. Connecting with the Eternal by immersing in prayer and meditation is essential to dynamic freedom. We also want to be fully present for every encounter—manifesting, for example, “a readiness to listen, with heightened spiritual perception” (Universal House of Justice, 28 Dec. 2010)—in

order to make the very best of each moment in service to others as well as for our own development. However, the foregoing sections of this essay suggest that we also need to immerse ourselves in, and contribute to, a coherent global narrative if we are to be genuinely authentic in our interactions. The present invariably becomes stripped of meaning if the past and the future are expunged from consciousness, just as—to elaborate upon a Bergsonian metaphor—a particular moment of music loses its power if it is extracted from a beautiful song that contains it. The impact of this moment is largely a factor of how it commingles with the rest of the song—of how it blends with the musical continuum of which it is an integral component. By the same token, the quality of the song itself depends upon the integrity of the moments that comprise it.

### *Consistency and Flexibility*

Directly related to the interplay between unity and diversity is that between consistency and flexibility. The House of Justice emphasizes this dynamic in relation to the conceptual framework of the community-building process mentioned above. It describes the framework as “a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates” (24 July 2013). As such, the framework not only provides coherence and guides learning, but also grows in complexity in response to such



learning. The relationship is dialectical, encouraging a unity in diversity both of experimentation that paves the way for new horizons of understanding and of narrative consciousness among an ever-widening circle of participants engaged in the generation of knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

### *Material and Spiritual Reality*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “[m]aterial civilization is like a lamp-glass. Divine civilization is the lamp itself and the glass without the light is dark” (*Selections* 227:22). As such, they are intimately tied together. In this connection, the House of Justice explains:

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has extolled “two calls” to “success and prosperity” that can be heard from the “heights of the happiness of mankind”. One is the call of “civilization”, of “progress of the material world”. It comprises the “laws”, “regulations”, “arts and sciences” through which humanity develops. The other is the “soul-stirring call of God”, on which depends the eternal happiness of humanity. “This second call”, the Master has

explained, “is founded upon the instructions and exhortations of the Lord and the admonitions and altruistic emotions belonging to the realm of morality which, like unto a brilliant light, brighten and illumine the lamp of the realities of mankind. Its penetrative power is the Word of God.” (Riḍván 2008)

Humanity must heed both calls on its journey to realizing its inherent oneness.

### *Quality and Quantity*

The quality of any endeavor to advance the global narrative increases with its quantity so long as the endeavor is undertaken in a mode of learning that allows for necessary adjustments to be thoughtfully made to it as relevant experience is generated and shared. Reciprocally, as the quality of an endeavor is improved and the learning shared, it stimulates its further multiplication in diverse narrative settings, which again sheds greater light on how to increase its quality.

### *Truth and Relativity*

Some conceptions of phenomena are more relative (socially constructed in different ways) than others, depending on the quality of inter-perspectival investigation brought to bear on those phenomena combined with the tangibility (perceptible presence) of the phenomena themselves. The result is

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26 In coming to a fuller—albeit not exhaustive—appreciation of the comparative virtues of this conceptual framework, it is beneficial to consider, among others, Imre Lakatos’s depiction of scientific research programs and both Helen Longino’s and Naomi Oreskes’s stress on the importance of diversity, consensus, and humility in the scientific process.

the relativity of relativity (Smith, *Relativity*; Smith and Karlberg). Relativity, moreover, can be helpfully reduced through the process of action, reflection, consultation, and study, which enables greater collective attunement with reality. However, because of the importance of diversity for unity and the discovery of truth, relativity can never be productively eliminated. If it were to be eliminated, the consequence would be totalism, thus unduly hampering the progress towards oneness.

### *Objectivity and Subjectivity*

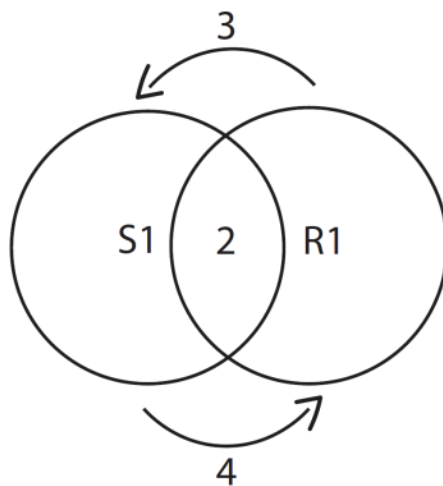
Objectivity is a matter of degree and increases relative to the extent to which diverse participants, with their subjective views, participate in true dialogue that is grounded in experience and illuminated by relevant divine guidance. Consultation, informed by action, reflection, and study, and inspired by an inclusive historical consciousness, characterizes such dialogue. Objectivity in turn enhances subjectivity by illuminating what is in fact worthwhile to pursue and assimilate in a manner that resonates with the individual.

### *Science and Religion*

These two systems of knowledge and practice, in their true forms, complement each other in that they supplement, correspond to, and cultivate each other (Smith, "Science and Religion"). As illustrated in Figure 1 below,<sup>27</sup> each

makes up for the limitations of the other by attending to different aspects of reality (S1 and R1); they overlap with each other in terms of, for example, some of the questions they address, some of the approaches they employ, and their joint reliance on faith (2); and religion, in various ways, fortifies the progress of science (3), while science, in various ways, fortifies the progress of religion (4). Both, moreover, are essential to the welfare of humanity, for as 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "until perfect, reasoning faith shall be implanted in the minds of men, it will be impossible for the social body to be inspired with security and confidence" (*Promulgation*). Together they give rise to a unity in diversity of knowledge generation that is essential for material and spiritual progress.

Figure 1.



depiction of the relationship between science and religion. Two arrows have been added to represent these two systems of knowledge and practice cultivating each other.

<sup>27</sup> The Venn diagram is a common

## CONCLUSION

The main argument in Part One of this essay was that humanity is currently afflicted with two delusional macro habits of mind—namely, of totalizing reality and of fragmenting reality—that, in various ways, perpetuate six defects of being, doing, and associating—distress, dissension, degradation, disenchantment, displacement, and despair—that currently plague society and that, by extension, hamper our capacity to deal effectively with crisis. Part Two then turned to an exploration of how to move beyond these delusional habits of mind and, by implication, overcome these defects. In this regard, it was maintained that what is required is for humanity to embrace and, in a mode of learning, contribute to the development of an inclusive historical, or narrative, consciousness, the ongoing articulation of which both informs and is enriched by a diversity of micronarratives. This global narrative also provides the motivational context within which to develop the capacity to think and act in accordance with a number of vital interplays such as those between unity and diversity, the individual and the collective, and worship and service. Finally, learning to think and act in this way makes it possible to transcend totalism and fragmentism, contribute to the unfoldment of the global narrative itself, and thereby generate a new form of freedom called dynamic freedom.

It cannot be claimed that this essay is much more than an introduction to the subject. For example, there is much

to be said regarding how dynamic freedom is distinguished from both negative and positive freedom as described, for example, by Isaiah Berlin, and how it relates to various Western philosophical traditions such as communitarianism and the capabilities approach as propounded by thinkers like Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum, and Michael Sandel. There is also much to be said about how it relates to other philosophical traditions such as Eastern, Indigenous, and African philosophy. For example, while diverse in scope, much of African ethics is grounded in the notion that the common good is paramount and that individual flourishing is a function of sociality, mutuality, reciprocal obligation, and interdependence. The following Akan maxims pithily capture this social ethic (Gyekye):

“The well-being of man depends on his fellow man.”

“The right arm washes the left arm and the left arm washes the right arm.”

And,

“Life is mutual aid.”

While briefly discussed, also notably lacking from this essay is a sustained exploration of the relationship between freedom and adherence to the laws of God given to us by the Manifestation for this day and, by extension, the power of moderation to foster excellence. Much could also be said about the

implications of such freedom for the art of governance which, among other features, arguably includes 1) eschewing conventional practices of authority that belong to the fragmented or totalistic mindsets, such as the notion that power means domination and “the accompanying notions of contest, contention, division and superiority” (Universal House of Justice, 2 Mar. 2013); and, 2) tapping instead into “the powers of the human spirit” such as those “of unity, of love, of humble service, of pure deeds” so as to “‘release,’ ‘encourage,’ ‘channel,’ ‘guide,’ and ‘enable.’” It also arguably includes 3) a much more “holistic and coherent approach to analysis and decision-making” at the level of the state, that conscientiously grapples with questions such as, “What will be the global implications of domestic policies? What choices contribute to shared prosperity and sustainable peace? What steps foster nobility and preserve human dignity?” (Bahá'í International Community, *Governance*).

Finally, while this essay has sought to demonstrate that learning to think and act in accordance with certain vital interplays enables humanity to transcend totalism and fragmentism and, by implication, to address the six defects of being, doing, and associating, it would be beneficial to explore more specifically how the concomitant rise of dynamic freedom addresses these defects directly as well as the crises they exacerbate. To this end, it is perhaps helpful to conclude with the following questions. While these questions admittedly come across as

rhetorical given the position taken in this essay, they are nonetheless offered as potential points of departure for further research on the subject in light of the deficiencies noted above.

Would there be so many defects of being, doing, and associating—such as distress over the paucity of collective will to deal with crisis, dissension between groups, degradation of morality and intellectual integrity, disenchantment with the lack of meaning in life, displacement in the sense of rootlessness, and despair manifesting in ritualistic mediocrity—if the capacity to think and act in terms of the interplays between unity and diversity, the individual and the collective, and worship and service was a prevalent feature of our society? Would COVID-19 cause so much death, suffering, and economic turmoil if the capacity to think and act in terms of these same interplays, as well as those between tribulation and progress, moment and time, and spiritual and material reality, among others, figured essentially in the individual and collective response to the pandemic? Would there, by extension, be such a tendency to politicize public health measures, as some have done, if it were understood that to truly advance, the individual is best served by prayerfully serving his or her fellow human beings? Would racism still exist as the social plague that it is if human beings embraced an inclusive historical consciousness regarding humanity's path to maturity that both informed and was enriched by a host of diverse micronarratives? Would the crisis of

climate change—and the disasters that come with it—be intensifying at the rate it is if humanity learned to think and act in accordance with the interplays between truth and relativity and science and religion? Would, finally, the penchant to distort facts, push partisan agendas, abuse norms, and manipulate minds for the sake of achieving or keeping power be so prevalent and so blatant if individuals were motivated to work alongside each other in the investigation of reality; share insights in a spirit of loving detachment, fully recognizing that their perspectives are partial and fallible; seek ways in which to build on each other's accomplishments; coalesce knowledge into more comprehensive understandings of reality; and refine collective vision regarding promising avenues of inquiry? That is, would there be such a drive to fabricate truth in line with paradigmatic expectations if individuals were inspired to operate in a learning mode in which a central concern was “to ensure that growing numbers participate in the generation and application of relevant knowledge” (Universal House of Justice, 2 Mar. 2013)?

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