

Becoming Attuned to Reality: Presuppositions and the Power of Learning in Action¹

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Abstract

What is entailed in accurately reading reality? The main thesis of this paper is that the learning mode of action, reflection, consultation, and study encourages investigators to attend to at least six “interplays” which, together, work to facilitate collaborative readings that are progressively attuned to reality. Owing to these interplays, this mode of learning in action helps to weed out disabling or harmful presuppositions and corresponding ideas, making it possible to discover and retain enabling or beneficial ones. By doing so, it resolves the longstanding problem of how to conceptualize objectivity and cultivate it in the search for truth.

Résumé

En quoi consiste une lecture adéquate de la réalité? La thèse principale du présent article est que le mode d'apprentissage caractérisé par l'action, la réflexion, la consultation et l'étude incite les chercheurs à tenir compte d'au moins six « interactions » qui, ensemble, facilitent une lecture collaborative de plus en plus fidèle à la réalité. Grâce à ces interactions, un tel mode d'apprentissage dans l'action contribue à éliminer les présupposés invalidants ou nuisibles et les idées correspondantes, ce qui permet de découvrir et de retenir ceux qui sont habilitants ou bénéfiques. Ce faisant, le processus permet de résoudre ce vieux problème du maintien de l'objectivité dans la recherche de la vérité.

Resumen

¿Qué implica una precisa lectura de la realidad? La principal tesis de este artículo es que la modalidad de aprendizaje de acción, reflexión, consulta, y estudio motiva a los investigadores a atender por lo menos seis “interacciones” las

cuales, juntas, funcionan para facilitar lecturas colaborativas progresivamente sintonizadas a la realidad. Debido a estas interacciones, esta modalidad de aprendizaje en acción ayuda a eliminar presunciones deshabilitadoras o dañinas y las ideas correspondientes, haciendo posible descubrir y retener presunciones habilitadoras y beneficiosas. Haciéndolo así, se resuelve el duradero problema de cómo cultivar objetividad en la búsqueda de la verdad.

INTRODUCTION

In our 2009 paper “Articulating a Consultative Epistemology: Towards a Reconciliation of Truth and Relativism,” Michael Karlberg and I address a central philosophical problem, namely, how to overcome the perennial tension between two opposed approaches to the nature of knowledge. Drawing upon the work of Richard Rorty, we refer to these conflicting approaches as *verticalism* (which is closely allied to objectivism and foundationalism) and *horizontalism* (which is closely allied to relativism and antifoundationalism). The paper maintains that the tension between these approaches can be both reconciled and transcended through the development of a *consultative epistemology*. In providing the rationale for this consultative epistemology, we introduce a number of key concepts including the notions that reality both *constrains* and *enables* the social construction of truth;² that phenomena are variously

tangible and so variously subject to social construction; and that, consequently, different social constructions are variously *attuned* to different phenomena.³ These concepts are revisited in more depth under the subsection “Reader and Reality” below.

The aim of the present paper is to build on the concept of attunement by exploring the following question: What is entailed in accurately reading

social construction of social institutions, social structures more generally, norms, laws, technologies, artifacts, and so on. In both our 2009 paper and the present essay, the concern is specifically with the social construction of truth and the epistemological tools—including models, concepts, categories, theories—used to understand, interpret, and explain different features of reality (or different phenomena).

3 The 2009 paper introduces the terms *general attunement* and *specified attunement*. The former occurs when certain features of reality, or phenomena, are noticed and understood basically for what they are across most, if not all, paradigms. The latter occurs when a paradigmatic framing (interpretation, conceptualization, model, theory, etc.)—a social construction—of a given feature of reality is especially attuned to, or in sync with, that particular feature of reality (whereas the framings of other paradigms may be especially attuned to different features instead). In other words, where there is specified attunement there exists positive feedback or resonance between a particular social construction and a particular feature of reality. Two other forms of attunement are also discussed: *anomalous attunement* and *fabricated attunement* (Smith and Karlberg 86–89).

2 One can speak broadly of the

reality? Or, to put it another way: What is entailed in achieving interpretations that are especially attuned to reality? In addressing this question, this paper introduces the term *collaborative attunement*. Collaborative attunement occurs when there is a unity among a diversity of attunements to a given reality⁴ consistent with the interdependent nature of reality as a whole.

A major consideration in addressing the question of what is entailed in accurately reading reality is the role that presuppositions play in both constraining and enabling our interpretations of it. The main thesis of this paper is that the learning mode of action, reflection, consultation, and study among an ever-widening circle of participants is central to weeding out harmful or disabling presuppositions and corresponding ideas, while also discovering and retaining beneficial or enabling ones. This is because this approach to learning in action encourages diverse investigators to attend to at least *six interplays* which, together, work to facilitate *collaborative readings that are progressively attuned to reality*. These are the interplays between reader and reality; whole and parts; reader and other readers; past, present, and future; action and reflection; and science and religion. These interplays are considered in a preliminary manner below. The paper then concludes with a discussion of how being attentive to

each one of them can help to resolve the longstanding problem of how to conceptualize objectivity and cultivate it in the search for truth, and it offers a few suggestions for further inquiry.

The question of how to accurately read reality is of direct concern to the development of a consultative epistemology because it is specifically tied to the question of what is involved in generating reliable knowledge. Viewed from a Bahá'í perspective, the ability to read reality is also an essential capacity for bringing about human prosperity, given the present challenge before all the inhabitants of the world “to draw on their collective inheritance to take up, consciously and systematically, the responsibility for the design of their future” (Bahá'í International Community). That is, to promote society building and material, social, and spiritual transformation, we as human beings need to be able to discern where we are in order to determine where to go next. In this connection, Bahá'u'lláh counsels us: “Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements” (106:1). Similarly, the Universal House of Justice states that “the challenge facing the friends serving at the grassroots is essentially the same in every place. They must be able to read their own reality and ask: ‘what, in light of the possibilities and requirements at hand, would be fitting objectives to pursue in the coming cycle or series of cycles?’” (30 Dec. 2021). This paper aims to help address this challenge by examining

4 One could also say “a particular feature of reality.” This paper is not concerned with drawing a distinction between reality and features of reality.

some of the dynamics that are most conducive to ensuring that such collective readings are both adequate and productive—that is, collaboratively attuned to reality—thus making it possible to more effectively advance lines of inquiry that will bring about more comprehensive understandings of prevailing exigencies and sustainable constructive change.

COLLABORATIVE ATTUNEMENT AND THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETATION

The challenge of achieving accurate, or attuned, readings of reality is at its core a problem of interpretation. Whereas there is a reality out there—a way things are—whether foundational or contingent, our presuppositions (and by extension our concepts, theories, perspectives, values, objectives, paradigms, worldviews, and so on) influence 1) what we perceive of reality, or what we identify as relevant facts and information; 2) how we interpret, prioritize, or categorize those facts;⁵ 3) the meanings, values, and significances we attach to those facts we perceive and categorize; 4) how we choose to act and further investigate reality in accordance with those facts and our interpretations of them; and 5) how our actions then reciprocally inform our perceptions and interpretations of reality, the facts we subsequently go on to identify and categorize, and the

5 Or, as Sophia Efstathiou and Zara Mirmalek put it, we carve out the world (234).

significances and priorities we attach to them.⁶ In our efforts to grapple with aspects of reality, we certainly select, interpret, and attach meanings to them, and construct them accordingly. It is, in effect, impossible not to: we can never approach anything “as it is,” fully divested of our constructed conceptions of it. But this being the case is not inexorably problematic. Our presuppositions, while certainly limiting, can also enable us to read or interpret reality—particularly if we adopt the right disposition, or posture, towards learning.

THE ROLE OF PRESUPPOSITIONS

The crucial role of our presuppositions is one of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s pivotal themes. He maintains that we cannot read a given reality, interpret a text, or, for that matter, interact with another person, without presuppositions exerting significant influence over the encounter. Our presuppositions enable us to read or interpret a text or reality, and to interact with others.⁷ As William R. Schroeder explains, “cultural background and situational context are necessary for comprehending anything human. Without utilizing this background people

6 An even more extreme form of the problem is the contention that reality is purely a social construct; this antifoundationalist claim is addressed in the 2009 paper (Smith and Karlberg).

7 Just as the text, reality, or exchange enables our readings of it. The interplay between reader and reality is discussed in some depth below.

cannot even describe events, much less explain them” (151).⁸

And yet Gadamer does not deny that presuppositions have their negative side. While they enable, they also constrain, blind and deprive. And as blinders and deprivers, they lead to conflict and to the oppression of others. History is fraught with examples. Daily life is fraught with examples. One is prejudice in the form of racism which, as the Universal House of Justice states, “is a profound deviation from the standard of true morality. It deprives a portion of humanity of the opportunity to cultivate and express the full range of their capability and to live a meaningful and flourishing life, while blighting the progress of the rest of humankind” (22 Jul. 2020). Gadamer would no doubt agree. At the same time, he stresses that while we can only understand by virtue of our presuppositions—while they *situate* us in relation to that which we seek to understand, especially initially—they need not determine the *outcome* of our understanding. Instead, understanding requires work. It necessitates care, perceptiveness, imagination, and above all, a willingness to put our own presuppositions on trial. This point is vital. According to Gadamer: “The authentic intention of understanding” is that “in reading a text, in wishing to understand it, what we always expect is that it will inform us of something. . . . In keeping to this attitude we grant

the text the opportunity to appear as an authentically different being and to manifest its own truth, over and against our own preconceived notions” (qtd. in Bernstein, *Beyond* 138).

Understanding consequently requires a receptivity to newness, to that which may challenge our presuppositions. We tend to (Gadamer would say we cannot help but) draw upon presuppositions to interact with others, or with a text, or with a feature of natural or social reality, but our motivation should not be to defend these presuppositions; rather, our motivation should be to judiciously appraise them, thus facilitating their refinement, or even their transformation. We must be disposed to “welcome just that guest who promises something new to our curiosity” (Gadamer “Universality” 9).

So, for example, when we read a text by Aristotle, we read it from our own perspective, from within our own paradigmatic constellation, or as Gadamer puts it, from within our own historical horizon. Our reading of it is informed and enabled by our presuppositions. But if we really try to understand it, we likely find that our presuppositions are challenged. By inviting Aristotle’s text to speak to us, by seeking to be informed by it, we open up our presuppositions to scrutiny. And as we are so challenged, we, as Richard Bernstein puts it, “enlarge our own horizon” (*Beyond* 149). We learn about ourselves and our deficiencies, and so make it possible to enrich—perhaps even transform—ourselves. In short, while we rely on our presuppositions

8 This position applies to the hermeneutic tradition more generally, of which Gadamer is a prominent member.

when entering into an encounter, we simultaneously anticipate that they may be transmuted by the encounter. We may even yearn for their transmutation.

INVESTIGATING TOGETHER

Gadamer's approach certainly has much to commend it, especially when we compare it to the culture of myopia, factionalism, disingenuity, incivility, and outright bigotry that infests much of society today. It is hard to deny that opening ourselves up to "otherness"—whether it be other people, a text, a given set of circumstances—is essential for examining, refining, and even revamping our presuppositions or background assumptions when reading or interpreting reality. Doing so is part of adopting what the Bahá'í community identifies as "a humble posture of learning" (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2008). Thinkers from other philosophical traditions also highlight its importance for advancing inquiry. For example, as Bernstein describes Charles Sanders Peirce's position (representing the pragmatist tradition):

all inquiry, including scientific and philosophical inquiry, begins with tacit prejudices and prejudgments. They provide necessary background and orientation. In the course of a specific inquiry we may come to reject some of these prejudices, but we never escape from having tacit background prejudgments that we do not question. Sorting out which prejudices are

to be criticized or rejected is not the beginning point of inquiry, but an end product, an *achievement of inquiry*. (*Pragmatic Turn* 33)

And as Schroeder explains Friedrich Nietzsche's position (the inspiration behind so many subsequent philosophical traditions), "interpretation is the central cognitive process in all knowledge because every phenomenon is examined from a perspective that limits what can be discovered within it." However, Nietzsche

does not mean . . . that all interpretations are false. On the contrary, most interpretations clarify some feature of the phenomenon; the epistemic task is to integrate multiple perspectives and to compensate for their limitations. The fullest comprehension requires that various perspectives correct and supplement one another and that new corrections emerge where additional illuminating perspectives are discovered. (140)

Along with Gadamer, both of these thinkers point towards the need for interperspectival collaboration so that a community of inquirers can proactively challenge and adjust their presuppositions in an effort to achieve more expansive, shared, understandings of reality. Increasingly, present-day researchers also recognize the need to encourage more participatory research methods across disciplines, involving groups or populations most affected

by such research. This is central, for example, to participatory action research (PAR) (Cornish et al.). Alison Wylie, moreover, provides a concrete example of the efficacy of this inclusive approach among archeologists, whose research benefited greatly by collaborating with regional Aboriginal partners. She concludes that such collaboration is essential for revealing presuppositions, goals, standards, and norms of justification that may otherwise go unnoticed, thus potentially hampering scientific inquiry. She observes: “The result is a process of critical appraisal that opens up alternatives that might never have arisen through internal deliberation” (77).

But what are the conditions that enable such participation to proceed most effectively? And further, what are the conditions that promote collaborative attunements to reality?

INTERPLAYS THAT FACILITATE READINGS OF REALITY

In order to read or interpret reality effectively and achieve collaborative attunements that (where merited) build on and weave together the varied attunements attained by different collaborators, a particular approach to systematic inquiry is required. A preeminent example of such an approach is the learning mode that the Universal House of Justice has been helping the Bahá'í community to understand and implement for a number of decades now. This mode is referred to as learning in action and is “characterized by constant action, reflection,

consultation, and study” (Office of Social and Economic Development (OSD), 26 Nov. 2012), a process which “[raises] up thoughtful, creative protagonists of the progress of the Faith, not mere technicians implementing a fixed methodology or formula for expansion” (Lample 83). Recently, the Universal House of Justice highlighted the significance of this approach, stating: “The conscious grasp of the process of learning and its extension worldwide, from the grassroots to the international arena, are among the finest fruits of the first century of the Formative Age” (28 Nov. 2023).

As noted above, the main thesis of this paper is that a systematic learning mode of this kind facilitates readings of reality partly because it engenders, incorporates, attends to, and quickens various “interplays”—mutually reinforcing and uplifting dynamics between two or more elements. Together, these interplays aid in weeding out inefficacious presuppositions, even harmful prejudices, while enabling the generation of new insights, some of which are more helpful and of lasting value—are more attuned to reality—than others. They do so, moreover, as part of an ongoing process of inquiry carried out in diverse settings.

Of the interplays that can be identified, the following six are considered in a provisional manner,⁹ namely, those

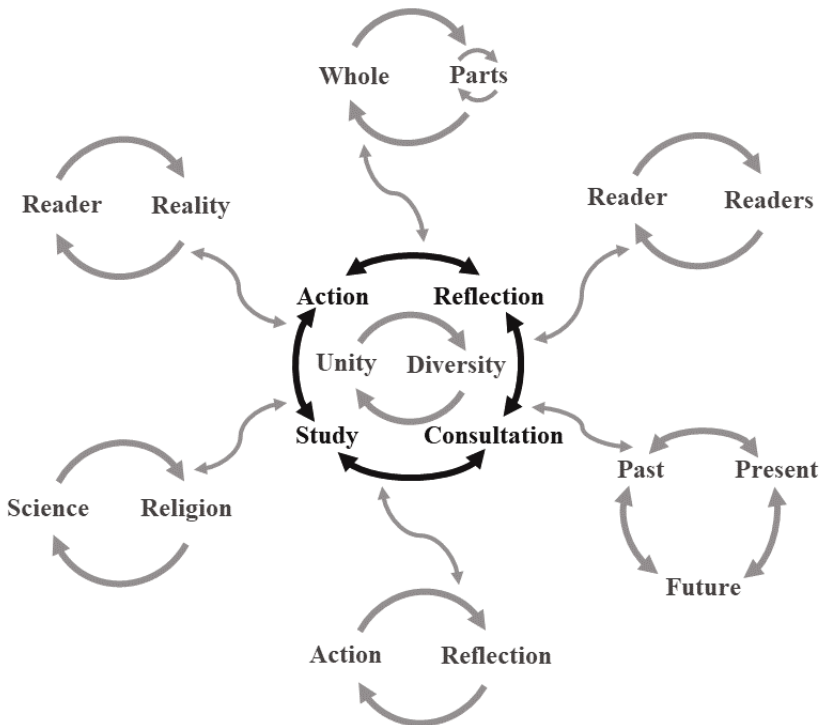
9 Much more could be said about each of them, especially in view of the wealth of relevant thinking one could appeal to within various disciplines. What follows is no more than an attempt to

between 1) reader and reality; 2) whole and parts; 3) reader and other readers; 4) past, present and future; 5) action and reflection; and 6) science and religion. Each interplay is posited as necessary for the investigative process—including the interpretive reading of reality—to proceed in the most constructive way possible. Because this paper represents only a preliminary contribution, these interplays are, for the most part, considered on their own terms. While there are some allusions below to how they interact with each other, a full discussion of this larger dynamic is beyond the scope of this paper.

That said, it is important to keep

 justify further inquiry into the significance and implications of these interplays.

in mind that each interplay is deemed insufficient on its own to produce the best outcomes. Instead, the most productive investigations, or readings, come about when there is an interaction between these six (or more) interplays. The learning mode of action, reflection, consultation, and study precipitates each interplay while also encouraging an evolving (macro) interplay between all six of them in the sense that they continually incorporate and vitalize each other. Each interplay can also be viewed as a different expression of the fundamental dynamic between unity and diversity, which is understood to lie at the core of the learning process. The figure below illustrates this relationship. It is anticipated that future papers will tackle this subject more directly.



READER AND REALITY

This interplay was discussed at some length in the 2009 paper (Smith and Karlberg). To recap, the gist is that as we engage with and reflect on a given reality, this reality has a say in how it is read or interpreted. It has push. It makes demands. While our presuppositions constrain and enable what we see of reality and how we categorize and describe it, they are conversely constrained and enabled by the conditions of reality itself. Paul Feyerabend says that scientists “are sculptors of reality” (269). But scientists—or indeed sculptors of any variety—“need materials with which to work, otherwise they cannot sculpt; and those materials must retain properties, otherwise they would not be materials; and those properties must involve conditions, otherwise they would not be properties; and those conditions must impose demands, otherwise they would not be conditions; and those demands must constrain, otherwise they would not be demands” (Smith and Karlberg 79). Our capacity to socially construct any given reality,¹⁰ like the capacity to sculpt a piece of marble, is limited by the properties and demands that stem directly from that reality.

Consider: Is it possible to socially construct a three-ton rock, or boulder, so that it is understood, related to, and addressed in the same way that a

rainbow is understood, related to, and addressed? Is it possible to thoroughly perceive a rainbow and a rock in the same way? Perhaps it is, but it seems unlikely that the construct “a rock is a rainbow” is sustainable when consciously experiencing the two phenomena. Why? Most fundamentally, because they exercise constraints over how they are understood and what can be made of them. They impinge, they make demands. In a manner of speaking, they have a say over what is conceived of or done with them. More generally, reality moderates the extent to which social construction can have its way with it. Social construction can make many things of the phenomenon “rock.” It cannot, however, make it into just anything. It could not easily render it as a rainbow. And if it could, it is unlikely the construction “rock-as-rainbow” would last for very long. Both the rainbow and the rock, upon sufficient experience with them, would prevail upon reflective beings to construct them otherwise. Their feedback would invariably diffuse any such extreme manifestations of social construction.

To be sure, social construction orders and manipulates reality. It, at the very least, imbues phenomena with meanings. Yet, reality can only be manipulated just so far. It sets parameters on how it is comprehended and socially expressed, which means that our social constructions of reality—our conceptions or theories of what it is—cannot develop unrestrained. As Helen Longino puts it: “There is ‘something

10 As mentioned above, only epistemological social constructions are being considered.

out there' that imposes limits on what we can say about it" (222). This is essential because, as John McDowell explains: "If our activity in empirical thought and judgment is to be recognizable as bearing on reality at all, there must be external constraint" (9). Without such constraints, our constructions would be devoid of any intelligibility.

At the same time, if (any given) reality constrains how it is socially constructed, it is equally true that it enables its social construction as well. This is key: one cannot sculpt unless there is something with properties (and hence conditions, demands, and constraints) to sculpt. Consequently, *reality-as-constraining* and *reality-as-enabling* are two sides of the same coin (Smith and Karlberg 79). The properties of reality may be paradigmatically manipulable, but they exist, nonetheless. If they did not exist, social construction could not proceed: it would have nothing to grab hold of; it would have nothing with which to work. More precisely, different phenomena or realities impose demands. And because they do, they both constrain and enable what we, in our diversity, see and construct of them.

The degree to which our constructions are constrained and enabled, moreover, is in large measure a factor of the *tangibility* of a given phenomenon. Sometimes reality speaks in a *more tangible* voice or speaks truth about itself in ways that most, if not everyone one of us, can hardly ignore. For example, that the sun provides light is a highly tangible feature of the sun. Upon

encountering the sun it seems unlikely that many of us would socially construct it as not providing light notwithstanding the varying paradigmatic lenses through which we view it, although we may attach different meanings to sunlight (it represents life; it represents skin cancer). The fact that light projected onto an object produces a shadow is another tangible phenomenon. These are obvious facts about reality that, in a manner of speaking, clamor to be pervasively known as what they happen to be. They "are noticed and understood basically . . . for what they are across a wide variety of paradigmatic lenses" (Smith and Karlberg 86). In other words, most paradigms are highly attuned to them (insofar as they can be humanly understood).¹¹

In other situations, (a given) reality is *intangible*, and so cannot be constructed. Perhaps one example is the fleeting image that occurs out the corner of one's eye. Here, one does not really make anything of the image because one does not take much notice of it or register it as being worthy of attention. As such, it is not prone to being socially constructed.

Then there are times when (a given) reality speaks in a more *semi-tangible*

11 There are always exceptions. For example, in this example, those without sight would not perceive the sun as providing light. The point is that, in cases of highly tangible phenomena, most, if not all paradigmatic lenses allow observers to perceive these phenomena for pretty much what they are (as far as is humanly possible).

voice, and so is socially moldable. The more semi-tangible a phenomenon is, the more amenable it is to being highly socially constructed because it is both noticeable and pliant. And because paradigmatic assumptions differ, the resulting social constructions of these semi-tangible phenomena can vary significantly in relation to each other. One example is that certain physical or mental symptoms can be constituted as manifestations of a biological problem, a psychological problem, or sociological problem (considered a manifestation of oppression, for example), or some combination thereof. The varying constructions of the “disease” hysteria is a case in point. Another is the “disease” category drapetomania, which is highly socially constructed compared to, say, the medical condition aortic stenosis.¹² The former is a social construction erected in affirmation of racist ideology and practices, whereas the latter is less socially constructed in that it has clear ties to an actual biological disorder. Certainly, each disease category is a social construction—every conception is socially constructed. The pivotal question, therefore, is the degree to which any given conception, or social construction, is attuned to a given reality.¹³

Since the concern here is with reading or interpreting reality, a natural analogy can be made to how we read a written text. Consider the revealed

Word of God. Paul Lample explains that in the Revelation, “meaning is sometimes explicit and sometimes veiled.”

Bahá’u’lláh explains that the Manifestation of God speaks a “twofold language.” “One language, the outward language, is devoid of allusions, is unconcealed and unveiled. . . . The other language is veiled and concealed, so that whatever lieth hidden in the heart of the malevolent may be made manifest and their innermost being disclosed.” Thus, at times we are dealing with explicit meanings and an esoteric interpretation would be inappropriate and incorrect. . . . At other times a verse has deeper meanings . . . (38)

An example of the former is the verse in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas which states that if anyone “layeth claim to a Revelation direct from God, ere the expiration of a full thousand years, such a man is assuredly a lying impostor” (165:1). Bahá’u’lláh continues in the same paragraph by stating: “Whosoever interpreteth this verse otherwise than its obvious meaning is deprived of the Spirit of God and of His mercy which encompasseth all created things.” In other words, one cannot justifiably interpret this verse to be saying something other than what it is clearly saying. It has high tangibility and, as such, has notable push and therefore largely constrains how it is read and interpreted. The same can be said about various passages in the Bahá’í Writings

¹² See Todd Smith, *The Relativity of Social Construction* ch. 6.

¹³ Where there is such attunement, it is referred to as specified attunement.

outlining certain principles of the Faith. One, for example, could not easily misinterpret ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s many statements on the equality of women and men to mean other than that women and men are equal. Again, these statements are highly tangible, meaning that most, if not all of us, perceive these statements to be saying basically what they are in fact saying. We are generally attuned to them.

On the other hand, many of the passages from Bahá’u’lláh’s *The Seven Valleys* are more esoteric, and in this sense more semi-tangible. What we make of them is thus more likely to be shaped in accordance with the presuppositions and knowledge we bring to bear on their reading. Additionally, “the meaning of the Book cannot be exhausted” (Lample 39). This inexhaustibility “opens the Text to a range of individual interpretations, including instances in which an authoritative interpretation has been made” (39). At the same time, “meaning continually emerges through study and application throughout one’s lifetime and over the entire course of the dispensation in a changing historical context” (39). Thus, even in the case of highly tangible texts—such as those that clearly espouse the equality of women and men or unequivocally state that racial prejudice is repugnant—our understanding of the essential principles they espouse is subject to perpetual development as we learn to apply them through action (which is taken up under the fifth interplay “Action and Reflection”) and as social conditions advance.

The upshot is that in both tangible and semi-tangible cases, our presuppositions about reality can be tested and refined. Testing takes place through “dialogue with the text,” and when this “dialogue is serious, the horizons of text and interpreter interrogate each other and new revelations emerge” (Schroeder 167). This dialogue, or interplay, is a necessary condition for adequate, and evolving, readings of a text. The same holds for the “text” of reality more generally.

This being acknowledged, the crux of the matter is that some phenomena, namely, semi-tangible phenomena, are more prone to being variously socially constructed than others. That is, some phenomena are more relative than others, which is the same thing as saying that relativity is itself relative. This is called *the relativity of relativity* (Smith and Karlberg 84). The point, then, is to figure out which social constructions, amongst the relativity of social constructions, are more attuned to reality than others, and to incorporate these attunements into our collective understanding of reality. This is where the next five interplays are directly relevant.

WHOLE AND PARTS

This interplay is consistent with the emphasis the Universal House of Justice places on “the coherence required among all areas of activity” (2 Mar. 2013); its warning that “difficulties often arise when phrases and sentences are taken out of context and viewed as

isolated fragments”; and, consequently, its admonition that “[t]he 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” (28 Dec. 2010). This interplay is, moreover, a central concern of the hermeneutic tradition and a vital consideration when reflecting on action (see the fifth interplay, “Action and Reflection”).

A simple thought experiment can demonstrate the importance of this dynamic. Think of how you, the reader, attempt to understand an essay such as this one. According to the hermeneutician, you are most successful when you employ a particular method. Namely, you begin by paying attention to various aspects or details of the essay. You subsequently relate those details to each other and then to other details you come across in your reading of the text. Each such detail forms a building block in your emerging understanding, providing additional context through which you go about understanding additional details, which then modify your understanding of previous details. The details, and the relationships between them, together form a basis upon which you come to an appreciation of the global thrust of the essay. Attention to the global, in turn, further informs your understanding of various details. All these elements take on meaning for you through comparison and contrast, and the global takes on meaning through attention to the details. You consequently participate in and

understand the essay by moving back and forth between the different parts and your maturing understanding of it as a whole.

This process is called the hermeneutic circle, which is the intellectual movement of understanding that proceeds through

a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring both into view simultaneously. . . . Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts which actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole which motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explanations of one another. (Geertz 239)

Friedrich Schleiermacher refers to this process as the mutual interanimation of the parts and whole of a text. As Schroeder summarizes it, “any thesis about the parts will be dependent on claims about the whole and vice versa” (153). Each clarifies the other through this dynamic interplay.

The value of this approach to the relationship between whole and parts can be understood by considering the human body. We can understand the heart as a part, but to gain a true appreciation of it as an organ in all its potential, we need to view it also in relationship to the other components of the body and the body as a whole. Contrarily, seeing

things, such as organs, only in isolation impoverishes understanding of both the parts and the whole and leads to unnecessary fragmentation and alienation. It amounts to disregarding 'Abdu'l-Bahá's claim

that the greatest relationship that bindeth the world of being together lieth in the range of created things themselves and that co-operation, mutual aid and reciprocity are essential characteristics in the unified body of the world of being, inasmuch as all created things are closely related together and each is influenced by the other or deriveth benefit therefrom, either directly or indirectly. (qtd. in *Huqúqu'lláh* no. 23)

The same dynamic holds for social phenomena. For example, when participating in community-building activities, it is helpful to see one's endeavors in the context of what others are doing, paying due attention to how the various activities are working together and reinforcing one another.¹⁴ This does not preclude specialization or the notion that certain activities (such

14 In its letter of 19 April 2007 to a National Spiritual Assembly, the Universal House of Justice states that institutions and agencies guiding the community building process "need to examine the dynamics of growth on a regular basis and analyze the way in which these elements are working together, in order to identify gaps and determine what adjustments should be made."

as children's classes) have their own characteristic discourses and learning processes. It does mean, however, that specialization becomes fragmentation when the activity specialized in is divorced from other processes and the whole itself. Specialization and harmonization are essential to each other in the way that diversity and unity are essential to each other.

It is, admittedly, not always easy to read reality in this way. It requires unremitting practice, particularly if we are to avoid falling into either one of two extremes, namely, "the extreme of mutely contemplating something without any understanding, and the extreme of too easily and facilely projecting our own well-entrenched beliefs, attitudes, classifications, and symbolic forms onto the alien phenomenon" (Bernstein, *Beyond* 91).¹⁵ Achieving hermeneutic understanding "is an art that requires patience, imagination, attention to detail, and insight" (91). It additionally requires a sense of adventure, an openness to change, and a willingness to engage with what might otherwise be considered foreign. Through such investigation, the individual strives to participate in the world of the other, to truly engage with the other, as discussed below under the third interplay ("Reader and Other Readers"). Yet, even the concept of "the other," if taken too literally, is problematic given the intimacy

15 These extremes are a type of what Lample calls "the extreme of irresponsible freedom and the extreme of fundamentalism" (175).

of our organic ties as articulated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the passage above.¹⁶

At the same time, to adequately understand the organic relationship between any given set of entities, we cannot lose sight of the entities themselves and their distinctive roles. Again, distinction and harmony go hand in hand. For example, the three protagonists identified in the Bahá’í community’s concept of the society-building process—the individual, the community, and the institutions—are distinct and yet bound together in the way that the leaf, the branch, and the fruit of a tree are concurrently distinct and bound together. The flourishing of each protagonist is a distinctive concern, yet the realization of its full potential is

16 This worldview has affinities with Indigenous epistemology, which affirms that all existence is connected and that each part of a community is “an integral part of the whole flowing movement and . . . modelled on the inward wholeness and harmony” (Ermine 105). See also John Fitzgerald Medina’s discussion of American Indian holism in chapter 6 of his book. These affinities deserve further exploration in future work. The Hegelian notion of identity is also helpful to consider here. As Schroeder explains it, identity emerges “when two terms that were originally thought to be distinct and independent are shown to be two aspects of a larger whole. The two terms are different expressions of the whole, dissolving and merging into one another, and thus cannot be independent. Hegelian identity is thus a dynamic process in which each term becomes the other. The dynamic unity underlying both terms is the ultimate reality” (53).

conditional upon the simultaneous flourishing of the other two. The development of each part necessarily depends on strengthening the interrelationships between all three of them. As explained by the Universal House of Justice:

These three constant protagonists of the Plan each have a part to play, and each one has capacities and qualities that must be developed. However, each is incapable of manifesting its full potential on its own. It is by strengthening their dynamic relationships with one another that their powers are combined and multiplied. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that the more the qualities of cooperation and mutual assistance are manifested by a people, “the more will human society advance in progress and prosperity”; in the Faith, this principle distinguishes and shapes the interactions of individuals, institutions, and communities, and it endows the body of the Cause with moral vigour and spiritual health. (30 Dec. 2021)

This second interplay is directly tied to the third.

READER AND OTHER READERS

As noted above in the discussion on interpretation, when striving to read reality, it is critical for each reader to consider the standpoints of other readers. However, it is insufficient to simply see

things from different perspectives. It is also necessary to explore the potential interplay between these perspectives. There are a few related reasons for this.

First, the interplay between reader and other readers exposes theoretical or perspectival anomalies in the face of empirical evidence and enables presuppositions to be probed, thereby facilitating transformation in understanding. Naomi Oreskes observes that “[a] homogeneous community will be hard-pressed to realize which of its assumptions are warranted by evidence and which are not” (137). On the other hand, as Sharon Crasnow explains with reference to Alison Wylie’s version of feminist standpoint theory, “a particular social/political location *may* allow one access to evidence that is not available from other locations” (154). This evidence may reveal unwarranted presuppositions or biases among members of a given scientific community. There is, consequently, enormous benefit in being attentive to it.

Second, not all descriptions of the world are valid (see the first interplay between reader and reality). They are only potentially valid.¹⁷ That is, all perspectives, with few exceptions, have at least the *potential* to shed light on different aspects of reality, but they *do not necessarily expose reality equally*. This is especially the case when specific phenomena or texts are being considered. Lamplé explains that

“[k]nowledge, in a nonfoundational sense, is not an object that can be possessed. . . . But neither are all views equal, or all ways of knowing as valid as any other. Many beliefs do not correspond to reality” (173). Similarly, as Schroeder observes, “[n]ot everyone has a *considered* interpretation: not every interpretation meets serious tests of evidence; and some interpretations account for more of the text (and do so more illuminatingly) than others” (150). For example, it would be difficult to take someone’s interpretation of Plato’s *Apology* seriously if that person had not in fact read it and was basing his or her assessment on the random comments of others. A goal of interspectival interaction, therefore, would be to allow the more helpful, illuminating perspectives—the more attuned ones—to come to the fore.

Then again, third, it follows from the relativity of the social construction of reality that the potential to contribute valuable insights into the way things are (or could be) is latent within practically any paradigm or perspective.¹⁸ It is therefore essential to never automatically presume that others have nothing of value to share when reading a given reality. The aim is to learn from each other, because by remaining locked into our own ways of thinking we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to appreciate how attuned to reality our respective constructions really are. In other words, we lapse

17 The following repeats and elaborates upon an argument outlined in Smith and Ghaemmaghami (“Consultation”).

18 The following again closely draws upon Smith and Ghaemmaghami.

into paradigmatic insularity and paradigmatic inelasticity, which are notable characteristics of dogmatism, factionalism, and fundamentalism. Alternatively, interspectival collaboration offers the possibility of richer, more incisive readings of reality and corresponding, more inclusive visions of how to advance inquiry.

Many thinkers advocate a move towards intersubjectivity for similar reasons. Gadamer, Peirce, Nietzsche, Longino, Oreskes, Wylie, and Crasnow have already been cited in this regard. Hannah Arendt is another; she states:

The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion. (237)

Yet another is, of course, John Stuart Mill, who, in his influential essay *On Liberty*, provides many compelling reasons for cultivating ongoing exchange, emphasizing the perils of suppressing opinions even if they are wrong. In the first place, every opinion is fallible, so it is prudent to consider alternative opinions for their truth value. We are prone to missing out if they are not considered. In the second place, even if a competing opinion is false, it is still crucial that it be carefully considered. Confidence in any given belief can only be justified if it is readily

subjected to and weathers regular challenges through meaningful exchange. The more often different perspectives come into contact with each other, the greater the opportunity there is for the valid ones to prove themselves and thus retain their vivacity. Otherwise, the valid belief becomes dogmatic and sterile, dulling the independent investigation of truth and itself degenerating into the shell of a belief with little more integrity than a superstition. Finally, according to Mill, the most likely situation is that different opinions on any given matter will harbor different facets of the truth of that matter. The point then is to contrast and, where possible, combine these facets into more accurate and expansive horizons of shared understanding. Again, we lose out if we refrain from doing so. Along similar lines, Efstathiou and Mirmalek advise researchers to be "humble about what [their] discipline can see" (238), and they stress the importance of different specialists "sharing some understanding and experience of each others' [*sic*] tools for producing knowledge" (243).

It is beyond the scope of this essay to consider with any justice the valuable contributions of such thinkers—along with many others—and how they correlate with the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. In addition, as noted above and below, viewpoint diversity is one factor among others promoting attunement to reality. For now, the main objective is to substantiate the claim that interspectival collaboration is desirable because it helps to reveal the strengths and challenges of

participating viewpoints and the prospects for further inquiry. Through it, “interpretations are subject to revision [as] new and intersubjectively convincing hypotheses are offered” (Schroeder 150). The result is an ongoing process of learning, a human enterprise which entails, as Lample puts it, “the never ending investigation of reality, the search for truth, the quest for knowledge, and as important, the application of knowledge to achieve progress, the betterment of the world, and the prosperity of its peoples” (173).

The question then becomes how such interspectival collaboration can be realized, since it cannot be achieved through the methods of communication typical of much of society today. That is,

[i]t cannot be achieved—indeed, it is severely handicapped—by the culture of protest that is [a] widely prevailing feature of contemporary society. Debate, propaganda, the adversarial method, the entire apparatus of partisanship that have long been such familiar features of collective action are all fundamentally harmful to . . . arriving at consensus about the truth. . . (Bahá'í International Community)

The claim here is that effective communication is facilitated by a commitment to the ontological assumptions of oneness, nobility, and purpose (see the sixth interplay between science and religion below); to eliciting the insights of others; and to a systematic approach to learning, which

includes study, action, reflection, and “a consultative process in which the individual participants strive to transcend their respective points of view” (Bahá'í International Community) and achieve “[t]he maturity of the gift of understanding”—a gift that “is made manifest through consultation” (Bahá'u'lláh qtd. in “Consultation” no. 3).

In his book *Intuition Pumps*, Daniel Dennet recommends Rapoport's Rules as a method for composing a successful critical commentary. Specifically, he advises the individual to:

1. Re-express your target's position so clearly, vividly, and fairly that your target says, “Thanks, I wish I'd thought of putting it that way.”
2. List any points of disagreement (especially if they are not matters of general or widespread agreement).
3. Mention anything you have learned from your target.

Dennet then states:

4. Only then are you permitted to say so much as a word of rebuttal or criticism. (33–34)

Following these steps, Dennet maintains, will make the target more receptive to criticism.

Undoubtedly much of benefit can be derived from this approach. Communication between individuals and groups with differing perspectives

is certainly facilitated when everyone involved strives to understand and demonstrate what they have learned from each other before offering their own opinions. However, consultation takes such interaction, and hence understanding, to another level.¹⁹ It does so in part by creating an environment in which no one is viewed as a target or adversary; rather all are seen as fellow participants seeking mutually beneficial truth. This search is a collective endeavor that requires the participants to “speak as if [they] are investigating the truth, saying: ‘Here these things are before us. Let us investigate to determine where and in what form the truth can be found’” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 15:3). Likewise: “The [individual] should not see in himself any superiority; he should speak with the utmost kindness, lowliness and humility, for such speech exerteth influence and educateth the souls” (15:4). In such an environment, “characterized by both candor and courtesy, ideas belong not to the individual to whom they occur during a discussion but to the group as a whole, to take up, discard, or revise as seems to best serve the goal pursued” (Bahá’í International Community). Both individuals and

19 On a related theme, Roger Neyman and Charlotte Wenninger argue that to truly rise above the many corrosive dysfunctionalities thwarting our capacity to address the problems of the age we live in, a new approach to transformative dialogue is required. See the forthcoming issue of this journal.

the group are more readily able to assess the adequacy of the insights or ideas shared—to determine how attuned they are to current conditions and to the way things could be.²⁰

Contrarily, outside a consultative environment, people tend to evaluate, probe, advise, and interpret from their own perspectives. Worse, they tend to indulge their presuppositions and biases and manipulate the contributions of others in ways that conform to their own ideological or egoistic perspectives.²¹ Yet, if the point is to achieve truth, foster greater understanding, and obtain more complete views of the subject matter at hand, our aim should be to consciously open ourselves up to diverse perspectives and allow them to have an impact on how we perceive and read reality. More than that, it should be “to pursue the generation of knowledge through mutualistic relations of power” (Karlberg 105) aimed at enabling “people from diverse backgrounds to transcend differences and harmonize perspectives” (Universal House of Justice, 1 Nov. 2022)—to foster a unity in diversity

20 They are, moreover, better able to mitigate both individual and group biases by disclosing the cognitive heuristics they tend to employ and scrutinizing the efficacy of their reasoning practices. This theme is covered in Andres Elvira Espinosa’s forthcoming article in this journal.

21 Especially in the polarized social and political environments now common throughout the world where “the generation of knowledge is characterized by adversarial power relations” (Karlberg 105).

of understanding among all involved in a given exchange.²²

In this context, our primary motivation²³ is to treat personal views and opinions not as finalities, but rather as constructions that are more or less attuned to reality and that belong to the group for it to work with, stretch, mold, or discard in light of other opinions, views, and evidence. Detachment is not the same thing as neutrality, much less apathy. Nor is it the same thing as being free of presuppositions. As discussed above, an individual utterly free of presuppositions would be at pains to offer any insights. Instead, detachment implies that whatever the individual brings to an interaction, she or he does so with a desire to see how all insights brought to the interaction play off, contravene, enhance, and correlate with, each other.

22 This aim applies notwithstanding the subject matter being considered. As OSED puts it: "Whether concerned with analysing a specific problem, attaining higher degrees of understanding on a given issue, or exploring possible courses of action, consultation may be seen as collective search for truth. Participants in a consultative process see reality from different points of view, and as these views are examined and understood, clarity is achieved. In this conception of the collective investigation of reality, truth is not a compromise between opposing interest groups. Nor does the desire to exercise power over one another animate participants in the consultative process. What they seek, rather, is the power of unified thought and action."

23 The following two paragraphs additionally draw upon Smith and Ghaemmaghani.

All insights are seen as contributions for the group to evaluate in light of other views in its mutual quest for truth. In this regard, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

Man should weigh his opinions with the utmost serenity, calmness and composure. Before expressing his own views he should carefully consider the views already advanced by others. If he finds that a previously expressed opinion is more true and worthy, he should accept it immediately and not willfully hold to an opinion of his own. By this excellent method he endeavors to arrive at unity and truth. (*Promulgation* 31:2)

In such an environment of reciprocal empowerment, if an idea of an individual is rejected by the group, then all participants including that individual accept the rejection. The individual who offered the idea may even actively participate in its refutation partly because the refutation is not considered to be an attack on her or him. The individual is never the target. An individual's idea may or may not hold up, but her or his nobility and capacity to generate knowledge always hold up. In fact, unless all participants scrupulously adhere to the concept of nobility and the virtue of detachment, the truth will remain obscured. Accordingly, when consulting, the participants

must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express

their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 45:1)

This approach, to recall, is close to Gadamer's views on communication. He stresses, according to Bernstein, "not only the common bond and the genuine novelty that a turn in the conversation may take but the mutuality, the respect required, the genuine seeking to listen to and understand what the other is saying, the openness to risk and test our own opinions through such an encounter" (*Beyond* 162). Similarly, David Bohm emphasizes the importance of moving beyond a culture of aggression and debate. Consistent with his claim that it is the wholeness, rather than the fragmentation, of reality that is real, he advocates for a condition in which people think together and nurture a spirit of sharing where "[e]verybody wins if anybody wins" (7) and where "[e]ach person is participating, is partaking of the whole meaning of the group and also taking part in it" (27) (which evokes the second interplay between whole and parts, discussed above).

Such communication, moreover, requires all participants to listen attentively, earnestly, and devoid of the intention to correct. It involves striving "to discover that precious point of unity" (Universal House of Justice, 25 Nov.

2020) upon which to build, informed by a deep regard for the nobility of each individual as well as for the potential value of her or his perspective. Through such humility and consideration, everyone is empowered, openness and joint exploration are encouraged, more resonant readings of reality are obtained, and collaborative attunement is thereby more readily achieved.

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Martin Heidegger, Wilhelm Dilthey and others make compelling cases that we are beings of time. For Dilthey, "[t]he central fact of human life is lived temporality, which orients persons in three directions simultaneously: backward toward past meanings, forward to future goals, and outward toward present demands" (Schroeder 157). It is often held that we should live in the present, but this is in fact undesirable, if not impossible. The present becomes stripped of meaning if the past and the future are somehow exorcised from consciousness in the same way that a particular moment of music loses its potency if separated from the rest of the song of which it is a part. As I argue in "Crisis and the Power of an Inclusive Historical Consciousness," the significance of this moment is largely a factor of how it comingles with the rest of the song—of how it blends with the musical continuum of which it is an integral component. More broadly, the present is interpenetrated by what has occurred leading up to it and by anticipation of what is to come.

This is not to say that we should not make the best of every moment—rendering it its proper due. We certainly should. Rather, it is to say that we are hindered from doing so when we are unattuned to our lived temporality—when we just live in the moment. One of our tendencies in modern society is to fragment time and to lose sight of it as an unfolding process—as what Henri Bergson calls *duration*. This tendency contributes to our overall sense of alienation from the world and from our own selves. Furthermore, we are presently unaccustomed to thinking of the present in light of the grand historical process of which we are a part. Yet, thinking in this way is essential for imbuing any given moment with significance.²⁴ It helps to frame that moment with genuine import and meaning.²⁵

24 Simone de Beauvoir makes a similar point, arguing that we should see specific human adventures as standing out against the background of time while also discerning historical patterns and progress. These two viewpoints are essential to each other.

25 Doubtless, other factors play a role in making a moment meaningful, as suggested by the discussions regarding the other interplays in this essay. These factors include relating an activity in any given moment to other activities going on in the community (second interplay); seeking points of unity with others (third interplay); seeing in each person the capacity to contribute to the generation of knowledge (third interplay); and framing each moment through the lens of certain fundamental beliefs about the world and human beings (discussed below under the sixth interplay regarding science and religion).

An inclusive historical consciousness is also essential to any adequate reading of reality and efforts to change it for the better. In this regard, the Universal House of Justice explains that “a particular conception of history, its course and direction,” underlies every Bahá'í endeavor. This conception is that humanity “is approaching today the crowning stage in a millennia-long process which has brought it from its collective infancy to the threshold of maturity—a stage that will witness the unification of the human race” (2 Mar. 2013). Without such a conception of history, people “can tenaciously cling to divisive identities that may have had their roots in an oppressive past”, thereby promulgating “[s]kewed historical accounts . . . employed to propagate narrow notions of belonging, to advance claims of exceptionalism, to stir old rivalries, or to stress past events that evoke a sense of victimhood” (1 Nov. 2022).

More specifically, adequate readings of reality involve, to the extent possible, an inclusive narrative approach that articulates current conditions (the present) in light of what has been collectively achieved so far (the past), what can possibly be done next (the immediate future), and our overarching objective (the long-term future). By the same token, the immediate future can be read in light of the past, the present, and the long-term future. By participating in the learning process, we weave together these dimensions of time and accordingly

enrich our readings, or understandings, of the realities with which we are concerned.

The Bahá'í community has been learning to model this dynamic in relation to its approach to the work of community building, which is currently organized and framed within the context of three-month cycles of activity. In community spaces such as the quarterly reflection gathering, readings of reality can involve, among other activities, reviewing previous conditions and objectives; assessing the steps taken over the previous three-month cycle to achieve these objectives, as well as the mistakes, accomplishments, and strengths accrued along the way; analyzing current conditions based on both quantitative and qualitative data; further developing the vision of growth in view of the progress achieved to date; and planning objectives and related next steps taking into account the capacities and resources presently at hand. Regarding the vision itself, the aim is to “express a general idea of how goals are to be achieved: the nature of the strategies to be devised, the approaches to be taken, the attitudes to be assumed, and even an outline of some of the methods to be employed” (OSSED). This vision is further informed and vitalized by the conviction that humanity “[a]s a distinct organic unit... has passed through evolutionary stages”; that it “has been moving forward along the path of its maturation”; that “it has, from one age to the next, received impetus from successive

Divine Revelations sent by God to progressively educate and civilize it”; that it is “now in the concluding period of its turbulent adolescence” and is “[s]tanding at the threshold of a long-awaited coming of age”; and that, consequently, “its needs are no longer served by the ideas and behaviours of prior stages” (Universal House of Justice, 1 Nov. 2022).

Consistent with the second interplay discussed above, such collaborative readings are most effective when they correlate the parts (such as discrete activities) and the whole (the efforts of the entire community), and when those most affected by, or immersed in, the reality in question are inspired to systematically contribute their own learning (third interplay between reader and other readers). No reading, moreover, is ever fixed or final. Through the process of learning in action—of action, reflection, consultation, and study—new experience is always generated, demanding an agility that allows for modifications in readings and adjustments to plans as circumstances demand. Further, through such a learning process, reality itself can be transformed, sometimes in line with expectations and sometimes not. “Conditions,” therefore, “need to be understood progressively, both from the perspective of a particular endeavour’s purpose and in the context of a vision of humanity’s collective existence” (OSSED). This leads to the fifth interplay.

ACTION AND REFLECTION

OSD states that “[a]t the heart of every development endeavour is consistent, systematic action. Action, however, needs to be accompanied by constant reflection to ensure that it continues to serve the aims of the endeavour.” Equally, reflection needs to be accompanied by constant action. Thus, OSD also describes a learning process that “unfolds in a way that resembles the growth and differentiation of a living organism. Haphazard change is avoided, and continuity of action maintained” (26 Nov. 2012). Fundamental to learning, therefore, is the interweaving of action and reflection. Such an interweaving assumes sufficient time and space to reflect and then act in accordance with a given reading so that its merits can be adequately assessed. Reflection and analysis are critical, but they cannot go on at the expense of focused activity. For without such activity, without effort being put into empirically testing an interpretation and its underlying presuppositions, readers cannot legitimately feel the push of reality and truly learn from it (which recalls the first interplay between reader and reality).

This point has some parallels with Richard Rorty’s neo-pragmatist approach, which recognizes the value of coming to agreements and supporting them for at least a time. He talks in terms of setting criteria by which to abide, because if we never set criteria, we cannot really get anywhere. In this connection, he argues:

In a post-philosophical culture . . . criteria would be seen as the pragmatist sees them—as temporary resting places constructed for specific utilitarian ends. On the pragmatist account, a criterion . . . is a criterion because some particular social practice needs to block the road to inquiry, halt the regress of interpretation, in order to get something done. (*Contingency* xli)

Rorty’s account in turn has affinities with Shoghi Effendi’s admonition that “[o]nce a decision is taken, it is incumbent upon all to follow the majority view, and to enforce and put it into effect, even if the decision is a wrong one” (qtd. in “Consultation” no. 38). Otherwise, we inhibit ourselves from discovering if the decision is in fact wrong. Furthermore, we impede ourselves from learning how attuned a particular reading is to reality. We, instead, simply wade in needless ambiguity and muddle about in pointless disagreements, unreflectively allowing our presuppositions to hold sway. Obviously, ambiguity is an inherent part of the learning process, but it can also be unduly self-inflicted and inflated. In another place, Rorty refers to “toeholds” (*Objectivity* 14). Without stepping into them, inquiry slides into the depths of equivocality.

Similarly, Longino, says that “if scientific inquiry is to have any effect on a society’s ability to take advantage of natural processes for the improvement of the quality of life, criticism of assumptions cannot go on indefinitely.”

Rather, “[t]he utility of scientific knowledge depends on the possibility of finding frameworks of inquiry that remain stable enough to permit systematic interactions with the natural world” (79). More than that, the utility of knowledge depends on the possibility of generating readings that remain stable enough to guide interactions with reality characterized by a unity in diversity of application. Certainly, re-readings of any given reality are necessary, but they are also deficient if they are uninformed by experience guided in the first place by a particular reading. At some point, we need to collectively settle on a decision, an agreement, a criterion, an interpretation—a collaborative reading—so that we can genuinely test it out in our diversity (that is, from our different disciplinary perspectives, standpoints, positions, life circumstances, and so on), and thereby generate insights that can inform further collaborative readings and, where appropriate, shed light on which strategies would conduce to bringing about beneficial change to prevailing conditions.

In other words, through such experimentation, the merits of a collaborative reading and the presuppositions that underpin it are more readily exposed. While the purpose is not to actively disprove or falsify a given interpretation, this unity in diversity of application enhances the likelihood that the interpretation’s strengths and weaknesses will be brought to light, particularly when the different readers then reflect and consult together (third

interplay) on their resulting experiences and findings. New knowledge is thus generated, setting the stage for more advanced collaborative readings and inquiry.²⁶ The past, present, and future (fourth interplay) of a given reality are conceptually rewoven and, as such, interpreted afresh.

Taken together, the result is a genuinely scientific process (see Friberg, this issue) in which any given reading of reality is reached through a unity in diversity of exchange, which is tested through a unity in diversity of application, which is then assessed in light of those applications, which is then further refined/changed/transformed through a unity in diversity of exchange, which is again tested through a unity in diversity of application, and so on. And it is through this process that a community of inquirers avoids paradigmatic stagnation and domination. Instead, interspectival collaboration flows; fabrications are culled, revised, and/or jettisoned; attunements are recognized, harmonized, and accentuated; and transformation is accelerated. This is what a consultative epistemology is all about. As Karl Marx reminds us, “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it” (245). However, pointed change

26 Some readers will note that there are similarities and differences here with Karl Popper’s approach to falsification. This warrants further discussion, which is reserved for subsequent work on this theme.

depends on interpretation—or adequate readings—and vice versa. Change and interpretation are interconnected. The process of action, reflection, and consultation discussed so far engenders this dynamic and enables participants to achieve progressively higher levels of collaborative attunement to reality.

In 2005, the Universal House of Justice explained that one of the

primary concerns will be to strengthen appreciation for systematic action, already heightened by the successes it has brought. To arrive at a unified vision of growth based on a realistic assessment of possibilities and resources, to develop strategies that lend structure to it, to devise and implement plans of action commensurate with capacity, to make necessary adjustments while maintaining continuity, to build on accomplishments—these are some of the requisites of systematization that every community must learn and internalize. (27 Dec. 2005)

One could extrapolate from this passage that new readings of what is the case, and corresponding visions of what could be the case, should be based on clear assessments of prevailing opportunities, strengths, challenges, capacities, and the overall experience amassed to date. Operating systematically in this way—in a way that harmonizes continuity with

flexibility—is necessary for achieving the focus required to advance understanding among a diverse community of inquirers.²⁷

SCIENCE AND RELIGION

But systematization on its own is not sufficient, which raises the sixth interplay for consideration, that between science and religion. This interplay, in turn, highlights the importance of the fourth component of the mode of learning in action, namely, study. Such study “involves not only constant reference to the writings of the Faith but also the scientific analysis of patterns unfolding” (Universal House of Justice, 2 Mar. 2013).

27 Much more could be said about the interplay between action and reflection and the related harmony between continuity and flexibility in relationship to the advancement of learning. For example, the Universal House of Justice observes: “We note that, as learning accelerates, the friends grow more capable of overcoming setbacks, whether small or large—diagnosing their root causes, exploring the underlying principles, bringing to bear relevant experience, identifying remedial steps, and assessing progress, until the process of growth has been fully reinvigorated” (29 Dec. 2015). It also calls for cultivating “an atmosphere that encourages the friends to be methodical but not rigid, creative but not haphazard, decisive but not hasty, careful but not controlling, recognizing that, in the final analysis, it is not technique but unity of thought, consistent action, and dedication to learning which will bring about progress” (28 Dec. 2010).

The relationship between science and religion is a complex subject as outlined in the paper “Science and Religion in Dynamic Interplay” (Smith), some elements of which are further discussed in Stephen Friberg’s article (this issue).²⁸ However, a few points warrant emphasis in view of the five interplays examined above.

In “Science and Religion in Dynamic Interplay,” I propose that the scientific process of action, reflection, consultation, and study cultivates the development of religion by, among other things, helping to ensure that religion does not degenerate into superstition and inelastic ritual. Prior to that, the essay proposes various ways in which religion in turn cultivates the development of science by, for example, furnishing it with various ontological assumptions, constructive dispositions, and teleological objectives. Of significance in this regard is the particular role that study plays in relationship to action, reflection, and consultation, especially as it pertains to communing with, and being inspired by, the Word of God. The proposition in the present paper is that, along with scientific analysis, study of the Sacred Texts is

essential for achieving collaborative attunements to reality and thus for advancing inquiry and the generation of beneficial knowledge.

The House of Justice emphasizes the vital relationship between reading reality and study of the Sacred Texts, stating that “[c]apacity rises to new levels, of course, as the protagonists of social change learn to apply with increasing effectiveness elements of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation, together with the contents and methods of science, to their social reality. This reality they must strive to read in a manner consistent with His teachings” (Riḍván 2010). More recently, and alluding to a number of themes discussed above, it states that, “individuals express their views and seek out the truth through a process of consultation, without insisting upon the correctness of their own ideas” and that, together, individuals “read the reality of their surroundings, explore the depths of available guidance, draw relevant insights from the Teachings and from accumulating experience, create cooperative and spiritually uplifting environments, build capacity, and initiate action that grows in effectiveness and complexity over time” (28 Nov. 2023). Regarding the significance of turning to the Word of God specifically, Lample explains that “[m]ental structures and habits of behavior of a Bahá’í are continually tested and shaped in response to the verses of the Word” (5). The same can be said of our interpretations, or readings, of reality. In other words, without turning to the teachings of the Sacred Texts and

28 Friberg discusses how ethical, moral, and spiritual values and practices integrate with the scientific process of learning in action. On a similar theme, Robert Sarracino (forthcoming) correlates spirituality with rationality and clarity of vision, among other characteristics, drawing upon the fourth paragraph of the 30 December 2021 message of the Universal House of Justice.

striving to see reality in their light, we risk socially constructing phenomena in ways that simply fit our paradigmatic presuppositions, notwithstanding how scientific we may be. We risk reifying our diverse social constructions and regressing into a state of paradigmatic intransigence. Conversely, our readings are most fruitful and conducive to interspectival collaboration when we strive, in our diversity, to consultatively perceive our varied experiences through the lens of the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith and other religions as well as the guidance of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice. This idea resonates with themes discussed in Whitney White Kazemipour's article in this issue, where, drawing upon anthropological theories, she explores how guidance found in the Bahá'í writings influences the capacity of groups to maintain unity while enabling the desired precarious "clash of differing opinions" necessary to generate "the shining spark of truth" ('Abdu'l-Bahá *Selections* 44:1).

The proposition, further, is that certain convictions enable interspectival collaboration to proceed most effectively, and that religion grounded in the Word of God furnishes us with these convictions. One conviction is that it is essential to entreat God to ensure that our presuppositions do not become impediments to achieving faithful readings of reality.²⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá exhorts

29 There are connections here with Indigenous philosophy, which maintains that "[u]nderstanding the universe must be grounded in the spirit. Knowledge must

us to "[t]urn to God, supplicate humbly at His threshold, seeking assistance and confirmation, that God may rend asunder the veils that obscure [our] vision" (*Promulgation* 97:8). In another passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá beseeches God that we may "purify [our] sight and behold all humankind as leaves and blossoms and fruits of the tree of being" (*Selections* 1:3). While our presuppositions make it possible for us to engage with reality and each other, *some presuppositions are far more suitable for this purpose than others*. In contrast, some, as already discussed, are repulsive and thus disabling and blinding, having dire consequences for human wellbeing and the course of beneficial inquiry. For example, Amín Egea points out that at the turn of the twentieth century, racism "was endorsed by a significant portion of the scientific community of the time" and was "even undergoing a major transformation equipped by new 'scientific' techniques—such as craniometry, phrenology, and physiognomy—that inspired new and abhorrent 'social reform' initiatives, such as eugenics and racial hygiene." By turning to the Revelation and diligently immersing ourselves in the Word of God, we are duly admonished and thereby rendered better equipped to dispense with such unseemly veils. We are similarly enjoined

be sought through the stream of the inner space in unison with all the instruments of knowing and conditions that make individuals receptive to knowing" (Ermine 108). Such correlations deserve far greater attention than can be offered here.

to do our utmost to observe reality with an open and unbiased mind—to in fact become “endowed with a new eye, a new ear, a new heart, and a new mind.” Bahá’u’lláh teaches us that this is only possible “when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker’s heart, and the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul.” Only then “will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubts and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being” (125:6).

This teaching relates to a second conviction furnished by religion, namely, the stipulation that certain presuppositions fundamentally befit the collective investigation of reality and are thus nonnegotiable—that the Sacred Texts provide core presuppositions that are especially conducive to productive inquiry.³⁰ For example, should we ever abandon the religious convictions that humans are inherently noble, that reality is essentially one, or that women and men are fundamentally equal, regardless of what others espouse? These beliefs are vital for shaping investigation. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “In proportion to the acknowledgment of the oneness and solidarity of mankind,

30 Science, of course, is based on core presuppositions of its own—that reality exists, operates according to universal laws, and is meaningfully accessible to our senses—without which our investigation of nature is hampered. See Sona Arbab’s helpful discussion of this matter (158-163).

fellowship is possible, misunderstandings will be removed and reality become apparent” (*Promulgation* 105:6). Certainly, we should always, along with Gadamer, yearn to welcome “that guest who promises something new to our curiosity,” to seek as best we can to learn from her, him, or it. But in the case of these principal tenets, the purpose of such encounters, scientific or otherwise, would be to mature our understanding of them, never to discard them. This, it could be argued, is part of what it means to combine an unshakable confidence in the precepts of Revelation with a humble posture of learning. Alternatively, what we might call secondary presuppositions can be modified or even discarded through such encounters, but again, without imperiling those which are core.³¹

This in turn relates to a third conviction furnished by religion, namely the certitude that these core presuppositions, being matters of faith, provide the unifying basis upon which meaningful scientific interaction can proceed. That is, appealing to such teachings is pivotal for facilitating unity of vision when reflecting on experience, checking assumptions, and refining interpretations of any given phenomenon—for achieving collaborative readings that are increasingly attuned to reality. Without them, and the dispositions they entail, we are unable to truly achieve Gadamer’s fusion of horizons

31 There are parallels here with Imre Lakatos’s concepts of the “hard core” and “protective belt” of a research programme.

or the dynamic interplay between perspectives that fosters mutually beneficial investigation and transformation.³²

A fourth conviction provided by religion is that chief among the dispositions for advancing inquiry is that

32 From a Bahá'í perspective, the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh provides the unifying basis upon which the learning of the community in all its potential can advance. According to the Universal House of Justice: "Out of love for Bahá'u'lláh and reassured by His explicit instructions, individuals, communities, and institutions find in the two authoritative centres of the Covenant [the Book and the Universal House of Justice] the necessary guidance for the unfoldment of the Faith and the preservation of the integrity of the Teachings. In this way, the Covenant protects and preserves the process of dialogue and learning about the meaning of the Revelation and the implementation of its prescriptions for humankind over the course of the Dispensation, avoiding the detrimental effects of endless contention about meaning and practice. As a result, the balanced relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions are safeguarded and develop along their proper path, while all are enabled to attain to their full potential and exercise their agency and prerogatives. Thus, the Bahá'í community can unitedly advance and increasingly fulfil its vital purpose by investigating reality and generating knowledge, extending the reach of its endeavours, and contributing to the advancement of civilization. After more than a century, the truth of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's affirmation is ever more evident: 'the axis of the oneness of the world of humanity is the power of the Covenant and nothing else'" (28 Nov. 2023).

of love. This is because perceiving the world through the vantage point of love allows us to transcend narrow materialistic understandings of human potential and purpose. Some thinkers, such as Iris Murdoch, have made this case, arguing that "[i]t is in the capacity to love, that is to *see*, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists" (82) and that "virtue [especially love] is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is" (109). The Universal House of Justice takes the concept further, asserting that it is *divine love* that opens hearts and minds, thus enabling personal and systemic prejudices to be transformed into veritable attunements to the way reality is and the way it is meant to become:

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. You are channels for this divine love; let it flow through you to all who cross your path. (22 Jul. 2020)

As discussed at length above, our presuppositions can both restrict and enable our readings of texts, reality, or other perspectives. Part of the aim of scientific inquiry and of intersperspectival communication is to place our presuppositions on trial and to weed out or alter those that are not conducive to further investigation. Encouraging diversity of participation—and eliciting different perspectives or insights—is vital for disclosing and shedding unwarranted presuppositions (third interplay between reader and other readers) that hamper the scientific process and the generation of knowledge more generally. However, the proposition here is that to truly enable such communication to advance and thus further cultivate the investigation of reality, certain dispositions, such as love for others, buttressed by certain nonnegotiable religious convictions, such as belief in human nobility, are essential. Specifically, without these dispositions and convictions, the clash of perspectives can backfire, leading to acrimonious obstinacy in place of mutually enabling investigation and transformation. Such convictions are admittedly grounded in faith. However, as argued in the paper “Science and Religion in Dynamic Interplay,” the same holds for any legitimate claim—scientific, religious, normative, or otherwise. The point, therefore, becomes whether such beliefs or statements of faith are held unreflectively or blindly, or whether, instead, they are consciously held and increasingly understood by deliberately putting them into practice and reflecting on their implications.

These, again, are just some of the proposed ways in which religion cultivates science; together, they provide no more than a partial view of how these two systems of knowledge are in dynamic interplay. The central idea is that this interplay is firmly grounded in the process of action, reflection, consultation, and study, and that it, along with the other five interplays discussed in this essay, is an essential factor in promoting our collaborative attunement to reality.

CONCLUSION:

RECONCEPTUALIZING OBJECTIVITY

This essay began by referring to Richard Rorty’s distinction between verticalism and horizontalism, which was the starting point for delineating the merits of articulating a consultative epistemology. Having himself embraced a horizontalist epistemology, Rorty writes that “[i]f one reinterprets objectivity as intersubjectivity, or as solidarity, in the ways I suggest below, then one will drop the question of how to get in touch with ‘mind-independent and language-independent reality’” (*Objectivity* 13). He writes further that “[p]ragmatists would like to replace the desire for objectivity—the desire to be in touch with a reality which is more than some community with which we identify ourselves—with the desire for solidarity with that community” (39). There is only solidarity for Rorty. Any ambition beyond that—any aspiration to get at the truth of reality—is imprudent.

From the perspective of a consultative epistemology, there is no reason

to replace objectivity with solidarity. In fact, solidarity, and in particular a solidarity that embraces heterogeneity, helps to promote objectivity. This is because it is a key—albeit, as suggested below, not the only—factor in becoming collectively attuned to (a given) reality to the extent that such attunement is humanly possible.

The relationship between diversity and objectivity is not a new concept. Gadamer, as we have seen, makes a strong case for intersperspectival interrogation. So, as we have also seen, does Longino. In her view:

The greater the number of different points of view included in a given community, the more likely that its scientific practice will be objective, that is, that it will result in descriptions and explanations of natural processes that are more reliable in the sense of less characterized by idiosyncratic preferences of community members than would otherwise be the case. (80)

“Values are only visible by contrast” says James Robert Brown in reference to Longino (56). Feyerabend agrees. The assumptions—prejudices—which shape our world remain largely unnoticeable to us until “we encounter an entirely different cosmology,” since “prejudices are found by contrast, not by analysis” (22). We cannot truly know our presuppositions, or their effects, simply from “the *inside*. We need an *external* standard of criticism.” Better yet, we need many

external standards of criticism to reveal as many perspectival and presuppositional merits and insufficiencies as possible. Through such a revelation there is a cleansing, an expunging of perspectival waste. Alternatively, we fall into dogmatism and gravitate towards totalitarianism. On this point, Naomi Klein offers the following warning, drawing on Arendt:

it is when everyday people *lose* their capacity for internal dialogue and deliberation, and find themselves only able to regurgitate slogans and contradictory platitudes, that great evil occurs. So, too, when people lose the ability to imagine the perspectives of others, or as [Arendt] put it in her essay “Truth and Politics,” “making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent.” In that state of literal thoughtlessness (i.e., an absence of thoughts of one’s own), totalitarianism takes hold. Put differently, we should not fear having voices in our heads—we should fear their absence. (65)

Longino, moreover, says that objectivity is a matter of degree, that it is relative to the extent to which transformative criticism is practiced. The more inclusive the community (or group) of inquirers is of diversity in its theory making, the better. Feyerabend agrees again, stating:

Unanimity of opinion may be fitting for a rigid church, for the

frightened or greedy victims of some. . . myth, or for the weak and willing followers of some tyrant. Variety of opinion is necessary for objective knowledge. And a method that encourages variety is also the only method that is compatible with a humanitarian outlook. (31–32)

The claim that objectivity is a function of intersubjectivity certainly has merit. However, intersubjectivity, while necessary, is insufficient to produce objectivity on its own. Objectivity depends on more than simply welcoming viewpoint diversity and encouraging dialogical exchange.³³ Based on what has been advanced in this paper, the claim should be accompanied by at least two additional claims. Together, these three claims support the idea that objectivity can be productively reconceptualized as collaborative attunement to reality.

The first additional claim is that the objectivity of any method of inquiry increases with the degree to which it

fosters synergistic collaboration.³⁴ As suggested under the third interplay (“Reader and Other Readers”), consultation encourages this synergistic collaboration. Through true consultation—with its emphasis on detachment, humility, and being oriented to unity—we achieve a veritable clash of opinions and perspectives, not a clash of personalities, while our less favorable biases and presuppositions are more readily subjected to productive scrutiny, revision, or rejection than would otherwise be the case.

The second additional claim is that objectivity, to the extent that it can be achieved, is made possible by the entire process of action, reflection, consultation, and study and the six interplays (or more) precipitated by this process. Intersubjective exchange and dialogue is woven into this dynamic process.

For example, through the interplay between action and reflection (fifth interplay), we test in unity the adequacy of a particular social construction’s attunement to a particular reality. From our diverse vantage points, we may see different effects when testing or applying the construction, or we may interpret the same effects differently. This is because reality can speak out in different ways to different readers (first interplay between reader and reality), perhaps sending messages of positive fit—of attunement—to some while sending messages of anomaly, or

33 In this connection, Longino argues that the objectivity of a method of inquiry depends “not just in the inclusion of intersubjective criticism but in the degree to which both its procedures and its results are responsive to the kinds of criticism described” (76). Similarly, Lee McIntyre maintains that “[n]o matter the biases, beliefs, or petty agendas that may be put forward by individual scientists, science is more objective than the sum of its individual practitioners” (91).

34 The word synergistic is chosen because it connotes a vibrant, evolving, harmony.

negative fit, to others. That is, emerging anomalies may indicate the need for further reflection between the different readers (third interplay), generating a consultative encounter that may in turn produce a more refined, or a more attuned, reading of the reality. Conversely, ensuing encounters or experiences may largely corroborate the previous reading, affirming that what were initially understood to be anomalies may justifiably be interpreted as congruent with the initial reading—albeit, perhaps also indicating the need for minor enhancements to this reading. In either case, the interpretation of any given experience is additionally facilitated when all participants strive to view it in light of the experience (fifth interplay between action and reflection again) and interpretations of other participants (third interplay between reader and other readers again); the present conceptual framework of collective understanding—including how other realities are currently being read—which may in turn adjust in response to individual and collective application and reflection (second interplay between whole and parts); both the learning to date and the evolving short and long-term learning objectives, which are themselves situated within an inclusive historical narrative (fourth interplay between past, present, and future); and the participants' study of the Sacred Text, which provides unifying dispositions and presuppositions that shape individual and collective inquiry, and that are, reciprocally, further understood as experience in applying

them accumulates (sixth interplay between science and religion).

This entire approach is aimed at achieving collaborative attunement to reality, and hence objectivity. Through the process of action, reflection, consultation, and study and the six interplays this process engenders, social constructions are efficaciously tested for their worth as attunements to reality. If this process proceeds in a spirit of true learning in action, anomalies are considered and dealt with to the satisfaction of all; social constructions are revised and unitedly applied once again in diversity; new synergies are achieved through reflection on experience, consultation, and study; and hence the march towards objective understanding advances. In sum: the degree of objectivity achieved is tantamount to the degree of collaborative attunement achieved, which is in turn a product of a unity in diversity of learning in action shaped by the varying demands of reality, attentiveness to the present context of knowledge, the capacity to consult, the cultivation of an inclusive historical consciousness, the interweaving of action and reflection, and an evolving commitment to ennobling assumptions and dispositions furnished by constant reference to insights enfolded within the Word of God.

NEXT STEPS

As mentioned at the outset, the foregoing is an attempt to justify further inquiry into the significance and workings of these six interplays. Much more

could be said about their implications for promoting collaborative attunement to reality and thus objectivity, and for the further articulation of a consultative epistemology. As noted earlier, the interrelationship between these interplays also deserves much greater attention. The following are a few related considerations that also warrant additional exploration.

First, it is important to reiterate that when reading reality, we never reach the truth of it in essence. We can agree with Rorty when he says there will never be “a moment at which the human race could settle back and say, ‘well, now that we’ve finally arrived at Truth we can relax’” (*Objectivity* 39). When it comes to discovering reality, we can only proceed towards it, never fully achieving an objective understanding of it in all its complexity. Anomalies will always rear their head. Repeated application of any reading in diversity will invariably lead to a clash with some aspect of reality hitherto missing from the picture. This notwithstanding, the claim here, contra Rorty, is that we can *proceed towards* truth. That is the key point. As Lample helps us to understand, the process of learning in action works to keep us on the right track—albeit with bumps and setbacks along the way. It helps to protect us from producing gratuitous social constructions, from reifying such constructions, and—as in cases of ideological hegemony—from making them a burden for all to bear. Rorty says we need to keep the conversation going. To be more precise, we need to keep learning in action going.

Second, notwithstanding the foregoing discussion, it might be objected that this process of learning invariably undermines diversity because it ultimately inclines us towards the creation of some inflexible, super-homogeneous, meta-paradigm to which we will all eventually succumb. This is owing to the stress placed on collaborative attunement and unity of understanding. In one respect, it is certainly conceivable that the process reduces diversity. The learning mode of action, reflection, consultation, and study necessarily delimits the possible variation in social construction. Through this process, ill-suited social constructions are more prone to refutation. The process also highlights certain questions worth consideration for a given time, making it possible to get on with inquiry without being waylaid by too many second thoughts and what-ifs.

Yet, it does not follow that learning in action invariably leads to the suppression of diversity altogether. Quite the contrary. People will always experience reality multifariously owing to their varying interests, intellectual pursuits, specializations, capacities, and skills, as well as their social, environmental, family, and other life circumstances. They will consequently investigate and grapple with reality differently which means that reality will speak to them differently, revealing distinctive anomalies or emitting tailored feedback deserving measured scrutiny. Moreover, learning in action necessarily involves an orientation to otherness (which necessarily means

not othering). It begets the independent investigation of truth, encouraging exploration into the many corners of reality. It also encourages specialization. But the specialization that it encourages is a permeable one that concurrently draws sustenance from, and nourishes, collective understanding.

As such, a meta-paradigm certainly does emerge through learning in action. But far from being homogeneous or totalitarian in nature, it is a dynamic unity that emerges, one that reciprocally invigorates and thrives on diversity of investigation. Perhaps a better term than meta-paradigm is *conceptual framework*, which, as the Universal House of Justice describes in relationship to the Bahá'í community's "effort to advance the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and the involvement in the discourses of society," is "a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates" (24 Jul. 2013). Such a framework provides coherence—owing, for example, to the core principles, assumptions, and dispositions it champions—and guides learning, but it also grows in complexity in response to such learning carried out in a multiplicity of contexts and oriented by varying, yet symphonic, objectives. In short, the relationship is dialectical and reciprocally animating (recalling once again the second interplay between whole and parts).

A third consideration is that, as acknowledged a few times already, this paper only discusses six interplays

that flow from the process of action, reflection, consultation, and study. There are others that flow from this mode of operation as well. Two that come immediately to mind are the interplay between worship and service and the interplay between the individual and the community. As discussed in "Crisis and the Power of an Inclusive Historical Consciousness," these interplays are essential for overcoming two delusional macro habits of mind that currently plague society, namely, the habit of totalizing reality and the habit of fragmenting reality. However, much more could be said about how these interplays contribute to collaborative attunement, objectivity, and the generation of knowledge. This would entail, for example, further uncovering the benefits of "developing a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which 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" (Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2010). Much more could also be said about the role of other interplays in this respect, such as "the dialectic of crisis and victory" (28 Dec. 2010).

Finally, there is plenty to explore regarding the implications of learning in action for democracy, authority, and freedom. For example, according to Jürgen Habermas, societies, cultures, and political arrangements should be assessed according to the degree to which they foster communicative

rationality, or ideal speech situations. Along these lines, questions worth considering include: 1) To what extent is mutually empowering, emancipatory discourse achieved through the process of action, reflection, consultation, and study and the interplays this process engenders? 2) How can this process contribute to the enrichment, even the transformation, of democracy? 3) What are the implications of this process for the exercise of authority and, more generally, for the relationship between the individual, the community, and the institutions? 4) Should not any system of governance be at least partly assessed according to how it fosters a culture of learning in action in all settings, from the grassroots to the global? Should it not be assessed, for example, by its capacity to “facilitate creative and collaborative exchanges among all elements of the community”; by its proclivity “to build consensus, to overcome challenges, to foster spiritual health and vitality, and to determine through experience the most efficacious ways to pursue the community’s aims and purposes”; and by the conscientious commitment of its elected representatives “to set aside their own likes and dislikes, to never consider themselves to be . . . central ornaments . . . or superior to others, and to eschew any attempt to exercise control over the thoughts and actions” (Universal House of Justice, 28 Nov. 2023) of their fellow citizens? 5) Is not such a culture of learning consistent with the promotion of true freedom and empowerment? And, finally,

6) Consistent with the principle of the harmony of science and religion, what, more specifically than has been offered above, is the role of Revelation in realizing these long-sought emancipatory goals?

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