

Learning to Sift: Reflections on Ten Years of Engaging with the Economics Discourse

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Abstract

In the decade since the Universal House of Justice wrote its 24 July 2013 message regarding the activities and direction of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, several collaborators have experimented with various approaches to engagement with the

1 Although this article was principally written by the author, the insights and reflections herein are the result of a collective effort that includes the contributions of many others, including Selvi Adaikkalam Zabihi, Sébastien Box-Couillard, Anissa Collishaw, Stefan Faridani, Holly Hanson, Nazanin Ho, Cameron Milani, Shirin Nikaein, Vesall Nourani, Anis Ragland, Navid Sabet, Andres Shahidinejad, Ryan Siegel, and others. Therefore, I often use “we” throughout the document to refer to this collective process, and have drawn on many notes, proposals and other documents written by various individuals. Nonetheless, although I attempt to include others’ reflections when available, I do not claim that this document is a completely accurate expression of the collective’s reflections and insights—which would be challenging to obtain at this time—and others involved in this process may naturally have different observations and conclusions.

discourse on economics. These efforts have included the collective reading of, and reflection on, various textbooks and articles around a particular theme; the development of a heuristic to help participants acquire the collective capacity to read a discourse; the writing of a document to facilitate seminars intended to help undergraduates studying economics understand “Economics 101” principles in light of the Bahá'í conceptual framework; and the initial examination of experimental methodologies in the economics discipline. A number of preliminary insights have emerged from these activities. This paper documents the experience of this collaborative group, and highlights key areas of learning that may be of assistance to others engaged in similar processes.

Résumé

Au cours de la décennie qui s’est écoulée depuis le message du 24 juillet 2013 de la Maison universelle de justice concernant l’orientation et les activités de l’Association d’études bahá’íes, plusieurs collaborateurs ont expérimenté diverses approches pour contribuer aux discussions sur l’économie. Ces mesures comprenaient la lecture et l’analyse, en groupe, de manuels et d’articles sur un thème particulier; le développement d’une heuristique pour aider les participants à acquérir la capacité à mieux cerner le discours sur un sujet donné; la rédaction d’un document pour l’animation de séminaires visant à aider les étudiants de premier cycle universitaire en économie à comprendre les principes d’« Économie 101 » à la lumière du cadre conceptuel bahá’í, et l’examen initial de méthodes expérimentales dans le domaine de l’économie. Ces activités ont permis de dégager un certain nombre de concepts préliminaires. Dans le présent article,

l'auteur relate l'expérience de ce groupe de collaborateurs et souligne les principales leçons qu'ils en ont tiré et qui pourraient être utiles à d'autres personnes engagées dans des processus similaires.

Resumen

En la década desde que la Casa Universal de Justicia escribió en su mensaje del 24 de julio de 2013 acerca de las actividades y la dirección de la Asociación para Estudios Baha'is, varios colaboradores han experimentado algunos abordajes acerca del involucramiento con el discurso sobre la economía. Estos esfuerzos han incluido la lectura colectiva de, y la reflexión sobre, varios libros de texto y artículos alrededor de un tópico en particular; el desarrollo de una heurística para ayudar a los participantes adquirir la capacidad colectiva de leer un discurso; el escribir un documento para facilitar seminarios que tienen la intención de ayudar a los estudiantes de pregrado de economía comprender los principios de "Economía 101" a la luz del marco conceptual Baha'í; y la prueba inicial de las metodologías experimentales en la disciplina de economía. Un número de comprensiones preliminares han emergido de estas actividades. Este artículo documenta la experiencia de este grupo colaborativo, y expone áreas claves de aprendizaje que pueden ser de ayuda a otros involucrados en procesos similares.

This paper is a humble attempt to share the author's personal reflections on engaging in various spaces and groups related to the Association for Bahá'í Studies' (ABS) efforts to learn about implementing the Universal House of Justice's guidance in its 24 July

2013 letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada. Specifically, the letter encourages every Bahá'í to "examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present," and inspired ABS to create "specialized settings" in which Bahá'ís involved in various disciplines can "reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work." ABS was guided to "explore fresh approaches," such as "small seminars to assist individuals from certain professions or academic disciplines to examine some aspect of the discourse of their field"; "special interest groups" that could hold "gatherings to intensify their efforts"; and "periodic communications or follow-up meetings" to "increase the effectiveness of the participation of these groups of individuals in aspects of the discourse in their chosen fields." Encouraged and inspired by this guidance, in 2013 a small group of collaborators involved in the field of economics as graduate students, practitioners and academics created an initial goal of examining some aspect of the economics discourse from a Bahá'í perspective. What follows is an attempt to document the processes by which our group set about this goal, and to reflect on challenges that arose, and insights that emerged. It is my hope that this paper may be useful, not only to those interested in engaging in this particular discourse, but more broadly to anyone already taking up, or hoping to take up,

the invitation of the Universal House of Justice in its above-mentioned letter. The experiences discussed here are of course only one example of what efforts in this area can look like, and are offered in the spirit of collective learning.

INITIAL ATTEMPTS AT ENGAGING WITH THE ECONOMICS DISCOURSE

ESTABLISHING UNITY OF THOUGHT AS A BASIS FOR COLLECTIVE INQUIRY

Our group almost immediately faced several challenging questions: Which area of economics should we focus on? How are we to practically examine some aspect of a discourse? Given that many academics devote their entire careers to reading and engaging in a discourse, how could we make progress given that we might only meet once or twice per month for an hour or two? Faced with these questions, we decided that we should simply start, confident that through the “ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation” we would make progress.

We began by focusing on the issue of inequality, given the well-known Bahá’í teachings related to reducing extremes of wealth and poverty, and some of the members’ personal interest and experience in this area. We identified a few academic articles that seemed particularly influential in the discourse, and read *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* by Thomas Piketty, a very popular and influential book that had contributed to a renewed

focus on inequality and its causes in the academic discourse and wider community. To organize our group’s collective exploration of these texts, we identified four questions that initially framed our inquiry into this discourse: (i) What are the key concepts discussed in each work? (ii) What are the assumptions and interpretations being invoked? (iii) What valid insights can we draw? (iv) What methodological framework was employed? Following cycles of action and consultation², the group came to the conclusion that, while these questions proved useful in pooling thoughts from the individual members of the group, it was evident that the insights and responses to these questions were biased by each member’s individual academic training and prior experience. The group found it difficult to examine an existing discourse in which the language, assumptions, methodologies and conclusions were derived from the discourse itself, as each participant was influenced by his or her own education, training and background. For example, the definition of “inequality” has a precise meaning in the economics discourse—and in other disciplines—that may be quite distinct from what is intended in the Bahá’í writings. Even the term “economics” itself, as used by

2 In the context of this early examination of a discourse, the cycle of action, reflection, study, and consultation was naturally simplified, with “action” consisting of reading and reflecting on the texts individually, prior to sharing insights collectively. The cycle naturally became more complex with later efforts.

academic economists, is replete with connotations stemming from their specific academic discipline. In fact, for some time we decided to avoid the term “economics” altogether for the less laden term “economies.” How were we to use the language in this discourse when we had no common understanding of what the terms meant, and the prevalent definitions had embedded within them the very underlying assumptions we wanted to examine? The group valued the pooling of insights, but this preliminary action did not lead towards unity of thought. We wanted to think as a collective body, and not limit our collective thought to the sum of its limited parts.

The group determined that it would attempt to establish a collective thought process by returning to the motivating force behind its existence: Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Thus, it established a new goal: to begin to elucidate core elements of a framework that guides an inquiry into economics, derived from the Revelation and authoritative sources of guidance branching therefrom. To aid this process, the group began by asking: What are some of the key concepts, metaphors and images in the Writings that can guide our inquiry into economics? After reading a number of Bahá'í texts, compiling relevant quotes, and writing reflections on this question, the group again realized that such a question, perhaps by design, was effective at pooling individual insights, but less effective at organizing a system of collective inquiry around a discourse. Thus, in

2016, the group developed the document *An Evolving Heuristic for the Collective Exploration of Discourses on Economies*. The document's intention was to help participants develop a collective ability to engage in a discourse and describe any economy, including developing a common language that would allow us to think with one mind, using words that we all understood, and which did not have assumptions about economic processes and values encoded in them.

The heuristic asked participants to reflect on two main questions: How do we collectively learn about the nature of economies from the accumulated knowledge published by scholars, experts, technicians, and communities who think deeply about the nature of economic systems? How do we collectively contribute thoughts inspired by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh to help evolve thinking along these lines? To explore these questions, we first created our own definitions of the terms “actors,” “objects,” “forces,” and “spaces” of an economy or economic system, and then considered the relationships and interconnectedness between them. Using these definitions, we returned to the greater discourse on inequality and read some articles and Bahá'í texts while considering the following questions:

1. Who are the actors implicitly exercising agency in the economy described in these particular texts?
2. What objects are utilized in this economy?

3. What are the main forces perceived to be in operation in this economy?
4. What spaces are outlined by the authors in this economy?
5. What is the objective of the described space?
6. Which forces does each space magnify? How does it magnify the influence of these forces?
7. What kinds of decisions do the forces compel actors to make?

The insights gained from the use of this evolving heuristic were profound on multiple (unexpected) levels. For example, despite the fact that some of the participants did not have robust academic backgrounds, they were all able to contribute thoughts and experiences relevant to our exercise of describing academic articles using our common vocabulary. Another profound insight from one of the participants was that he felt he was able to read the articles in a dispassionate light using the evolving heuristic while simultaneously identifying key assumptions made by the authors. In other words, he did not read the articles, as he normally did, by trying to identify which aspects of the articles he agreed with and which he did not.

By using the heuristic to analyze both academic texts and Bahá'í writings, we were able to construct descriptions of economies using a language common to both sources that allowed for clearer identification of correlations between the two. We felt

that our discussion was able to utilize this common language, and, in so doing, move us closer to the collective thought process we were seeking when we decided to undertake this exercise. The recognition of the heuristic as one that was evolving helped us feel empowered to learn how to construct a common language rather than dwell on whether the language was adequate.

EARLY EFFORTS TO EXAMINE THE DISCOURSE ON INEQUALITY ON THE BASIS OF SHARED UNDERSTANDING

After utilizing the heuristic with a small group of interested participants at the 2016 ABS conference, we established the goal of creating ongoing sub-groups, organized by time zone, that would choose articles and books to read on the subject of economic inequality, and analyze them using the evolving heuristic as well as related Bahá'í material. The purpose was to collectively explore a prevalent discourse in society—economic inequality—and, after first achieving unity of thought by examining this discourse using a common evolving heuristic, to then identify elements of this discourse that correlated with insights from Bahá'í Revelation and related guidance. We set a goal for each sub-group to summarize five to ten articles on economic inequality, developing short statements that, to the best of the group's ability, used the evolving heuristic to describe insights from the articles. We aimed to then compile these articles at an in-person meeting with

all the various sub-groups, in order to synthesize insights from the discourse.

The groups formed and engaged in their work for some time, and then gathered the following year, in January 2017, at Green Acre Bahá'í School to share reflections and insights. The following questions guided our learning process during this meeting: First, how do we engage in a coherent collective investigation of the discourses of society in light of the Revelation? And second, how do we understand economic inequality after utilizing the heuristic to read and evaluate articles from the discourse on inequality? With respect to the second question, after studying some relevant Bahá'í writings and encouraging participants to read the various articles, each group shared a brief presentation of their understanding of the discourse in light of the heuristic document, which included identifying relevant actors, objects, forces, spaces and relationships. The gathering also included a number of presentations by individual Bahá'ís regarding their attempts to correlate Bahá'í teachings with their academic research and related endeavors.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF READING GROUPS

Overall, these early attempts at engaging with the economics discourse generated substantial insights and momentum. From this gathering, a number of related initiatives resulted, including several groups that would continue to use the heuristic to explore

the economics discourse, as well as others that formed independently to study various books related to finance, economics and cooperatives. Some groups found the heuristic valuable, but others decided not to use it, either because they did not find it useful or, perhaps, because the purpose behind it was not well understood. Nonetheless, these initiatives, as well as the experience of other ABS-inspired working groups focused on various disciplines during this period of initial experimentation, generated useful learning for the Association. ABS began to actively promote the development of *reading groups* to “encourage individuals connected to a given professional or academic discourse to engage thoughtfully and rigorously with important texts in a consultative environment that aims to increase their capacity to contribute to that discourse” (“Reading Groups”). In subsequent years, many ABS reading groups would emerge focused on topics such as education, climate change, the harmony of science and religion, justice and reconciliation, law, media, public health, the dynamics of social change, and urban planning.³

But for our groups focused on economics, new challenges and questions emerged, as is common when progress is made. The questions we were confronting included: Once we build our

3 See, “Bahá'í Studies: ‘Reading Groups’ Enrich Annual ABS Conference.” For a more comprehensive list of reading groups since 2020, see Appendix A of “Ten Year Retrospective, 24 July 2023” in this issue.

capacity to read articles within a discourse, what is the next step? How can we continue to examine a discourse that is so vast? Which books and articles should be chosen? And at what point do we ourselves actively engage in the discourse and “introduce relevant aspects of the teachings,” as opposed to somewhat passively reading the existing discourse generated by others? Moreover, over the ensuing years, it became difficult to maintain the various groups. One particular challenge was that membership would often change and attendance was inconsistent, which made it difficult for groups to progress in their collective understanding. One early insight was the importance of designating a facilitator who would organize the groups, lead the discussion, maintain the meeting schedule, and send reminders and updates. Naturally, however, some facilitators would move on to other endeavors and it was often difficult to find individuals to replace them. It was also difficult to sustain motivation and enthusiasm when groups were reading together but were not actively engaged in some form of service or output. Although groups were encouraged to begin writing reflections, notes, and other documents, writing as a collective often proved quite challenging, as each individual had a different understanding of the purpose of the exercise and varying degrees of ability to dedicate the time required to write, review and edit in a way that ensured progress and reflected the collective views of the group. Thus, many groups naturally

dissolved as progress stalled, participation fell, and enthusiasm waned. Indeed, it was challenging to develop and maintain the unity of thought and enthusiasm required to sustain a long-term commitment when the required steps for understanding and engaging in a discourse remained somewhat nebulous.

ENGAGING INTRODUCTORY ECONOMICS FROM A BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE

IDENTIFYING A NEED: HOW TO SUPPORT UNDERGRADUATES STUDYING ECONOMICS?

At the 2017 ABS Conference, some members of the economics working group reflected and consulted with a couple of more experienced Bahá'í academics and collectively brainstormed various potential future lines of action. One idea that emerged was finding ways to support young Bahá'ís studying economics in university. It was recognized that many undergraduates study economics at some point during their studies, and are often challenged by the assumptions underlying the predominant “Economics 101” curriculum. Examples of these assumptions are mentioned in a message from the Universal House of Justice, including the idea that “self-interest, far from needing to be restrained, drives prosperity, and that progress depends upon its expression through relentless competition” (Letter dated 1 March 2017). We also recognized that the

economics profession is particularly influential in academia and the wider society, with its methodologies and assumptions impacting policymakers, business leaders, and researchers in other social science disciplines. As just one example among many, Robert Bork—former U.S. Solicitor General, circuit court judge and prominent antitrust law scholar with many devoted followers—described studying undergraduate economics as a “religious conversion” that “changed our view of the world,” and that led to his adopting many economics viewpoints in writing important antitrust law (qtd. in Kwak 12). Indeed, in his book *Economism*, James Kwak argues that—despite evidence of their harm, ineffectiveness and unintended consequences—overly simplified concepts from Economics 101 curricula have been commonly used to argue against policies such as minimum wages, environmental regulation, income redistribution, government-sponsored health insurance, and many others.

We also knew that while students majoring (or pursuing graduate studies) in economics often end up receiving a more nuanced, balanced and critical view of economics and economic models, for the majority of Economics 101 students this simplified curriculum is the only exposure to economics that they will receive during their university study. As some of us were PhD students who were teaching (or would likely be teaching in the near future), we felt a certain responsibility regarding how we would accompany

young people in learning and applying economics. We were aware of the academic studies that show that students appear to become more selfish and less cooperative after studying economics,⁴ and were inspired by these insightful observations describing the experience of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) concerning how Bahá'í students can respond to the materialistic frameworks of the disciplines they are studying, however challenging a task this may be:

Students who participate in our programs often speak of the strong materialistic worldviews they encounter at university, views that utterly reject their most cherished convictions and thereby leave virtually no room for dialogue between science and religion. They tell us about their difficulty in expressing their ideas freely, and of the absence of mental tools available to them to identify and analyze the basic assumptions underlying the theories with which they are presented. To perform well in university, they feel, they have to think and learn inside the models that dominate their respective fields of study, adopt the methods inherent to these models, and, in the final analysis, work

4 For examples, see John R. Carter and Michael D. Irons “Are Economists Different, and If So, Why?” and Robert H. Frank, Thomas Gilovich, and Dennis T. Regan “Does Studying Economics Inhibit Cooperation?”

uncritically to propagate them. Maintaining a coherent vision of their lives and their involvement in society and, at the same time, adopting methods that are congruent with their beliefs is a tremendous challenge for them.

In response to such concerns, we invite students in our programs to reflect on elements of the conceptual framework that guides Bahá'í participation in the discourses of society, enabling them to take ownership of their education and to prepare themselves adequately to make contributions to their fields without sacrificing their religious beliefs, or without compartmentalizing them into a segregated part of their lives reserved for religious belief. (Haleh Arbab 34)

HOW TO APPROACH THE ECONOMICS 101 DISCOURSE?

Our group decided to create the document *Engaging Introductory Economics from a Bahá'í Perspective*, which would be used in small seminars to stimulate a conversation about the assumptions underlying the Economics 101 discourse and relate these to some basic Bahá'í teachings. But in preparing this document, we again faced challenging questions, such as: How can we help young Bahá'ís understand how to approach and engage with a discourse? How can we examine the discourse while avoiding the common tendency to be overly critical? How

can we appreciate the many insights that the Economics 101 discourse has to offer, without adopting assumptions and approaches that are contrary to the Bahá'í conceptual framework? How can we avoid an attitude of superiority, and preclude excessive speculation on topics about which we have few answers, such as what a future Bahá'í economic system might look like?

We decided to begin the document with a section intended to help seminar participants reflect on how they might approach the economics discourse. One important element of this approach is to encourage participants to guard against adopting an attitude that suggests we know what the future world order will entail. In this regard, we found the following statements by Shoghi Effendi particularly instructive and useful:

To claim to have grasped all the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's prodigious scheme for world-wide human solidarity, or to have fathomed its import, would be presumptuous on the part of even the declared supporters of His Faith. To attempt to visualize it in all its possibilities, to estimate its future benefits, to picture its glory, would be premature at even so advanced a stage in the evolution of mankind. (*World Order* 34)

There are practically no technical teachings on economics in the Cause, such as banking, the price system, and others. The Cause

is not an economic system, nor should its Founders be considered as having been technical economists. The contribution of the Faith to this subject is essentially indirect, as it consists of the application of spiritual principles to our present-day economic system. Bahá'u'lláh has given us a few basic principles which should guide future Bahá'í economists in establishing such institutions which will adjust the economic relationships of the world. (Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in Hornby no. 1868)

In addition, while we attempted to be clear that, as Bahá'ís, we do not question or equivocate on the relevance to our economic life of spiritual principles—such as the oneness of humankind, the harmony between science and religion, the spiritual nature of human beings, the equality of men and women, and the need to eliminate the extremes of wealth and poverty—we were equally clear that it would be misguided to think that having these intellectual commitments implies that one can only learn from the ideas of people who share our assumptions about the fundamental nature of reality. Thus, another element of our approach was to learn from economists who are also deeply concerned about the welfare of society, and to derive insights from the store of knowledge in the field. This approach raises the challenge of discerning which aspects of prevalent thought are in line with our

conceptual framework, and which are partly or wholly incongruent with it.

In our efforts to examine the economics discourse, we have found the following insights and approach of ISGP to be particularly helpful:

One of the main concerns ISGP has been addressing is its own attitude toward the existing body of knowledge of humankind, which is, of course, growing at an astounding rate. As Bahá'ís, we believe that this is the age of humanity's transition from childhood to maturity. To what extent, then, does present knowledge belong to the childhood stage of social development and to what extent is this knowledge already the harbinger of the stage of maturity?

There is no easy answer to this question. It is not difficult for us to see that the affairs of the world at this stage of the evolution of human society—particularly on a global scale—are in disarray. War, terrorism, the degradation of the environment, and numerous other dreadful conditions under which large segments of the population live remind us of the magnitude of the forces of disintegration operating in the world, and confirm for us our belief that the present order is defective indeed. But underlying this disorder is a system of knowledge based on a set of assumptions about the nature of the human being and society. How can the present system of thought and

knowledge be adequate, and yet give rise to such a defective order? Is our plight the result of building faulty structures on a sound and proven foundation?

In following this line of questioning, ISGP has been cognizant of the dangers of the extreme, namely, to reject all the accomplishments of humankind as childish, irrelevant, or wrong-headed, and hence to dream about the appearance of the mature sciences of the future. This is certainly not what happens in the life of the individual as he or she passes through various stages of development. During childhood we develop many elements of our character and personality and many intellectual tools that we will use throughout our lives. We do not need to throw these out as we grow up; rather we develop them and build on them.

The implications that this kind of thinking has for ISGP's endeavors are clear. We have to encourage those with whom we collaborate to have full mastery over the relevant fields of knowledge, yet approach these fields critically. The level of our acceptance of any set of statements will thus naturally vary from field to field . . .

. . . . One would not, of course, reject everything offhand but would study prevalent theories carefully and gain as many insights from them as they can offer without becoming rigidly attached

to them. The capacity to do so—which includes the capacity to examine in light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation the assumptions underlying a given set of statements that claim to describe or explain some aspect of reality, particularly social reality—continues to be foremost in the thinking of ISGP as we try to contribute to the capacity of individuals and groups to participate in the discourses of society. (Haleh Arbab 29)

Thus, while our approach includes a willingness to radically question assumptions and concepts underlying present-day economic theories and practices, it also recognizes and draws on useful insights and tools the discipline has to offer. The same article quoted above provides an example pertaining to economics:

our conviction that competition is not the organizing principle of society does not mean that we cannot appreciate and benefit from studying the great advances in the field of economics based on the principle of competition, which seems to explain so much of how contemporary society operates. In short, even while disagreeing with one assumption, one may find another premise quite appealing, for example, the principle of diminishing returns. (Haleh Arbab 30)

In approaching the economics discipline, we viewed ourselves and

participants in our seminars as developing the capacity to “sift” the discourse, and found the following statement by Dr. Farzam Arbab particularly useful:

It is evident that a decision to acquire the capacity to engage in a rigorous examination of the intellectual foundations of our civilization places formidable demands on how the intellectual life of the community needs to develop. Sifting through the habits of thought, the principles, the methods, and the conceptions that underlie civilization today and deciding which can be retained and expanded upon and which need to be cast away is not a trivial pursuit. Which of our societies' cherished conceptions of human psyche, which elements of today's elaborate theories of social progress, which methods of education, which conceptions of work, wealth, love, justice, freedom and authority are the playthings of childhood and infancy? And what is to replace them? (15)

Another principle we found helpful to emphasize in *Engaging Introductory Economics from a Bahá'í Perspective* was that of engaging each idea in terms of its best possible interpretation and seeking to understand its most noble aspiration and purpose. This habit helps us expand our capacity to explore questions in a rigorous, open, and unifying way, while avoiding the common tendency among intellectual

communities of dismissing, belittling, and caricaturing the ideas one does not agree with. Bahá'u'lláh warns us “not to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men” and to “approach such sayings and writings in a spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy” (*Gleanings* 154:1). Indeed, in some of our early seminars we observed that it was somewhat challenging for certain participants to avoid the tendency to be overly critical of the economics discipline, which would often lead to other participants speaking up to defend it. This back-and-forth would significantly detract from the seminars' main purpose of learning to constructively engage with a discourse, build on existing knowledge, and discover points of unity.

Adopting this principle does not imply naïveté about the way power operates in discourses—certainly, the space in which the intellectual life of society unfolds is shaped by various interests, some powerful and intent on defending the current order. In adopting this practice, we strive to better understand the context in which ideas develop and the challenges they arise in response to; to sharpen our capacity to observe a complex reality; and to develop the kind of nuanced thought that will help us sift through humanity's current store of knowledge. The following passage further clarifies why this principle is a feature of Bahá'í participation in discourses:

If the members of every community are able to find in the teachings

of Bahá'u'lláh the realization of their highest aspirations, it necessarily follows that the followers of Bahá'u'lláh should be able to identify in some way with the highest ideals and precepts cherished by each of the world's peoples. This extends to cases where those ideals and aspirations might not be readily apparent within a particular ideology or practice—sometimes, they might be almost totally obscured. In the context of participation in the discourses of society, such a perspective implies, among other things, that when involved in discussions between groups holding differing worldviews that risk spiralling downward into irreconcilable antipathy, it is necessary to maintain the conviction that by elevating a discourse to the level of principle and high ideals, it becomes possible to achieve unity and consensus. For this reason, a Bahá'í contribution to a prevalent discourse will often seek to reconceptualize the way in which it is being framed and will explore underlying assumptions that represent conceptual obstacles. An effort to reframe the discussion in this way is typically founded on the idea that unity is the critical prerequisite for fundamental progress and that acceptance of the principle of oneness can release moral capacities and induce a positive dynamic in a discourse and a will to find consensus. (Razavi 171).

MODELS IN ECONOMICS TEXTBOOKS

After considering how to approach the economics discourse, the document asks students to reflect on the use of models in the Economics 101 curriculum. Models are central to how the community of economists communicates, and are usually presented as abstractions of social reality that provide insight and make predictions. Models can be incredibly useful in simplifying complex realities and helping students understand basic important concepts, such as supply and demand. However, models are based on assumptions and simplifications that are not always fully articulated, let alone explored, when students first learn to apply them in Economics 101 classes. And models have tremendous power to shape our worldview, intentionally and unintentionally. Models are not mere technical objects and there is a moral dimension to the practice of economic thinking. Simple mathematical models intended to convey basic concepts under certain conditions and in specific contexts may often penetrate the thinking and discourses of society in harmful ways. The following statement made by the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) provides some insight on this subject.

Conceptual models of what is normal, natural, and possible exert a powerful influence on personal behavior. For example, individuals tend to make less generous choices the more they are exposed to the self-centered calculations inherent in classic economic theory. Such models also inform the

structures of society, privileging certain kinds of values over others and shaping ways of seeing, understanding, and approaching the world. The models we employ, therefore, are of crucial importance. Some help to release latent potential, confer greater clarity of thought, illuminate unexpected paths forward, and facilitate constructive action. Others distort, constrain, and confuse.

Humanity has employed countless conceptual models throughout its history, their various elements contributing to progress in some instances and hindering it in others. But regardless of what has come before, it is clear that the transformational change required today calls for new vantage points from which to explore challenges, assess realities, and imagine solutions. We must therefore be prepared to assess—and if necessary, revise—the assumptions that have shaped the current international order and structures of society.

Consider, for example, the belief that humanity is inherently contentious and conflict is unavoidable. That human behaviour is driven primarily by self-interest, and prosperity must therefore be based on the pursuit of personal advantage. That the well-being of groups or nations can be meaningfully understood on their own, disconnected and in isolation from the well-being of humanity as a whole. That the contemporary world is characterized by a fundamental lack of human and material resources, rather than an abundance of them.

Notions such as these, implicit and unspoken in many cases, go largely

unchallenged in contemporary discourse. But their real-world consequences are significant indeed. Can the belief that human beings are inherently selfish be anything but destructive when applied in contexts such as the community, the family, or the school? Can an understanding of economics grounded in a presumption of individuals or groups gaining advantage over others lead to anything but the grossly unequal conditions multiplying on every side? Alternatively, what would global economic structures look like if collaboration were understood to be a more powerful driver of development than competition? How would extremes of poverty and excesses of wealth be addressed if the good of the individual were truly understood to be inseparable from the good of the whole? What policies would be enacted if governmental priorities were shaped primarily by the interests of the citizenry at large, rather than by the preferences of a select few with privileged access to the halls of power? (*Towards*)

In many introductory economics courses, students are presented with the proposition that there is a clear distinction between using economic models to describe the economy *as it is* and using them to make statements about how the economy *should be*. The thinking is that description is a scientific exercise, while decisions about how the economy should function are essentially political. However, the above statement makes it clear that models both describe and shape our reality. Thus, participants are asked

to reflect on the role and usage of models in economics—including the purpose, assumptions, and limitations of models—and to look beyond the superficial distinction between descriptive and prescriptive analysis.

CONCEPTIONS OF HUMAN NATURE

After helping participants develop the capacity to “sift” the Economics 101 discourse with respect to models, the document turns to the capacity of correlating the prevalent discourse on economics with the Bahá’í writings in order to humbly consider how insights from the experience and knowledge of the Bahá’í community can help advance the economics discourse. Undoubtedly, this is a tremendous task that will continue for generations, and it is often difficult to know where to start. Yet, since we viewed this as a capacity-building exercise, we felt that simply considering a couple of relevant examples would be sufficient for our purposes. We decided to focus on two main areas that play a prominent role in introductory economics courses: 1) Conceptions of human nature; and 2) Economic systems based on markets.

Regarding human nature, our document reviews a common model of the human being found in mainstream Economics 101 textbooks, sometimes referred to by the short-hand *homo economicus*. Typically, *homo economicus* is viewed as being completely rational and objective, self-interested, unchanging, and able to make instantaneous calculations about the costs

and benefits of any choice. According to the *homo economicus* model, as humans behave in this self-interested way, through competition and free markets, the “invisible hand” leads to the overall well-being of society. As Adam Smith famously pointed out in 1776, “[i]t is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest” (20).

Yet, the document highlights that this view of human beings was not always prevalent in economics, and instead arose and became influential through a series of historical decisions and circumstances. For example, Amartya Sen argues that whereas the discipline of economics had a predominant focus on the “ethical” in the 1700s and 1800s, an “engineering” approach came to dominate in the mid-1900s, due in part to its focus on prescribing real-world policy and guiding statecraft, and in part to economists’ admiration for the elegance of models in physics, which they desired to emulate in mathematical, impersonal models of economics. In his book, *Economism*, James Kwak argues that in the mid- to late-1900s business leaders, politicians and other elites actively promoted and supported economic models that provided a rationale for free markets, reduced regulation, lower taxes, and rising inequality. They did so by, amongst other things, funding think tanks, politicians and academics that encouraged these viewpoints.

However, as the economics discourse and related policies moved

more in the direction of prescriptive models based on *homo economicus* and free market ideals, there were often unintended and harmful consequences. Samuel Bowles, in *The Moral Economy*, argues that in designing policies and incentives that create monetary rewards and assume that people are inherently selfish we in fact induce individuals to behave in more self-interested ways than they might otherwise. We shared one example of this phenomenon in the *Engaging Introductory Economics* document: when daycare centers in Haifa imposed a fine on parents who picked up their children late, the number of days on which parents were late to pick up their children actually increased. This result was not only contrary to the predictions of the basic Economics 101 model, but suggested that the intrinsic motivation of parents' respect for the daycare workers' time had been supplanted by a market-based belief that they could simply pay for being late.

ECONOMIC SYSTEMS BASED ON MARKETS

After reviewing both the history of how the contemporary model of the individual human being came to dominate the economics discourse and Economics 101, and some of that model's underlying assumptions and limitations, the document explores the Bahá'í Writings and considers some principles that might be useful when reflecting on human nature, and that are largely ignored by the economics discourse. It is important to note that the document

does not disagree with the economics view of the individual as self-interested and competitive. Indeed, the Bahá'í writings also reflect this viewpoint. However, we consider it an *incomplete* picture of the individual human being. In other words, through our process of sifting, we recognize the achievements of the economics discourse in describing how human beings currently behave, and the tremendous amount of important research that has resulted from this model. Yet, from the Bahá'í teachings, we also recognize the spiritual nature of human beings and their resulting capacities for altruism, cooperation, self-sacrifice, and other behaviors not anticipated by the *homo economicus* model. Many passages from the Bahá'í writings touch on this concept, including the following:

Today, all the peoples of the world are indulging in self-interest and exert the utmost effort and endeavour to promote their own material interests. They are worshipping themselves and not the divine reality, nor the world of mankind. They seek diligently their own benefit and not the common weal. This is because they are captives of the world of nature and unaware of the divine teachings, of the bounty of the Kingdom and of the Sun of Truth. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 68:3)

In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he

approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in men. In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature. The attributes of his Divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature. Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man's spiritual nature, whereas all his imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature. If a man's Divine nature dominates his human nature, we have a saint. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 18:2)

O Son of Spirit! Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Arabic Hidden Words* no. 22)

Thus, we might say that, from a Bahá'í perspective, conceiving of the human being as self-interested is a limited and static view of human nature. It therefore seems reasonable that even as economists intent on designing an economic system must anticipate the possibility of self-interested behavior, they must not view the individual as incorrigibly selfish, as this would prevent them from incorporating features into the economy that could exert an elevating influence on a human being who is striving to overcome their base desires. We conclude this section of

the document by asking seminar participants what aspect of reality we are missing when we adopt such a limited model of the individual as our lens to study human nature. Can we create models, policies, institutions, and communities that, while acknowledging both the lower and higher nature of humanity, help to encourage and develop its highest potential?

In the section regarding economic systems based on markets, the document asks seminar participants to reflect on the purpose of a market, and consider other ways of allocating goods and services, such as lottery, "first come-first served," merit, and greatest need. For example, while many goods and services are allocated by markets, there are many others that are not, such as emergency care, friendship, academic grades, kidneys, and parental love and attention. While recognizing the great benefits that markets have brought to humanity—indeed, we all benefit from markets on a daily basis—we also consider the problems and limitations of markets, such as their tendency to increase inequality, crowd out intrinsic motivation, and demean or diminish the intrinsic value of what is bought and sold. We reflect on whether, from a Bahá'í perspective, it makes sense to use standard economic reasoning or create markets in situations where there is a clear moral dimension, such as paying for votes, for sex, or for a kidney replacement, or where intrinsic motivation may be diminished, such as paying children to read, behave or get good grades.

We then explore the important concept of “community” in the Bahá'í conceptual framework and how different communities have historically allocated and distributed goods and resources in more cooperative ways, such as Muslim communities that rely on social capital to create credit and insurance markets (Udry), and a Bahá'í-inspired community banking program that trains small groups of community members on how to save and manage their money, so they can offer loans from their own modest savings to other bank members and finance development initiatives in the community (“Community Banks”). The document helps participants reflect on the importance of relationships and the concept of the oneness of humankind, illustrated for instance in the BIC's reflections on Bahá'u'lláh's analogy of the human body:

Whether in the form of the adversarial structure of civil government, the advocacy principle informing most of civil law, a glorification of the struggle between classes and other social groups, or the competitive spirit dominating so much of modern life, conflict is accepted as the mainspring of human interaction. It represents yet another expression in social organization of the materialistic interpretation of life that has progressively consolidated itself over the past two centuries.

In a letter addressed to Queen Victoria over a century ago, and employing an analogy that points

to the one model holding convincing promise for the organization of a planetary society, Bahá'u'lláh compared the world to the human body. There is, indeed, no other model in phenomenal existence to which we can reasonably look. Human society is composed not of a mass of merely differentiated cells but of associations of individuals, each one of whom is endowed with intelligence and will; nevertheless, the modes of operation that characterize man's biological nature illustrate fundamental principles of existence. Chief among these is that of unity in diversity. Paradoxically, it is precisely the wholeness and complexity of the order constituting the human body—and the perfect integration into it of the body's cells—that permit the full realization of the distinctive capacities inherent in each of these component elements. No cell lives apart from the body, whether in contributing to its functioning or in deriving its share from the well-being of the whole. The physical well-being thus achieved finds its purpose in making possible the expression of human consciousness; that is to say, the purpose of biological development transcends the mere existence of the body and its parts. (*Prosperity*)

Reflecting on the principle of elevating each thing to its highest aspiration, we consider the role and purpose of a market or economy from a Bahá'í

perspective. While we have no model for what such a market or economy might look like, we know that it should reflect certain principles—such as cooperation and altruism—avoid extremes of wealth and poverty, be in harmony with the environment, communities, and family life, and promote spiritual development:

Society must develop new economic models shaped by insights that arise from a sympathetic understanding of shared experience, from viewing human beings in relation one to another, and from a recognition of the central role that family and community play in social and spiritual well-being. Within institutions and organizations, priorities must be reassessed. Resources must be directed away from those agencies and programs that are damaging to the individual, societies and the environment, and directed toward those most germane to furthering a dynamic, just and thriving social order. Such economic systems will be strongly altruistic and cooperative in nature; they will provide meaningful employment and will help to eradicate poverty in the world. (Bahá'í International Community, *Valuing Spirituality*)

REFLECTIONS ON CONTRIBUTING TO THE ECONOMICS 101 DISCOURSE

We conclude the document by asking participants to reflect on some of the

discourses that they regularly participate in. For example, we ask: In which of these discourses do you discuss topics related to economics? How might the above concepts inform your participation in these discourses? What specific insights have you gained that might help you contribute to these discourses and introduce concepts that can help advance the discourse? Despite the enormity of the task ahead of us, we encourage participants to reflect on the Universal House of Justice's words: "Every choice a Bahá'í makes—as employee or employer, producer or consumer, borrower or lender, benefactor or beneficiary—leaves a trace, and the moral duty to lead a coherent life demands that one's economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals, that the purity of one's aims be matched by the purity of one's actions to fulfill those aims" (Letter dated 1 March 2017).

Overall, while still preliminary, the feedback from *Engaging Introductory Economics from a Bahá'í Perspective* seminar participants has been quite positive, and most express a desire to continue the conversation. Young people are grateful for the opportunity to connect with and learn from others in similar circumstances and seem to gain valuable insights from the seminars as they continue with their studies and engage in various discourses. Our group has explored possibilities for continuing to accompany these young Bahá'ís and explore the discourse in a more ongoing collective process, such as by holding shorter regular virtual

workshops that touch on related topics or return to themes from the document. But time constraints have proven formidable. For now, we plan to offer the seminar at least once or twice per year—including at the annual ABS Conference—and to continue to refine the document in light of experience.

REFLECTIONS ON METHODOLOGIES IN THE ECONOMICS DISCIPLINE

Another recent initiative by a subgroup of the greater ABS economics working group involved participating in and contributing to the ABS seminars for graduate students and faculty aimed at exploring questions related to methodology. These seminars started in 2019 and were inspired by the Universal House of Justice's appeal to reflect on the methods employed in our respective disciplines:

One of the critical aspects of a conceptual framework that will require careful attention in the years ahead is the generation and application of knowledge, a topic that those gathered at the conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies will explore in August. At the heart of most disciplines of human knowledge is a degree of consensus about methodology—an understanding of methods and how to use them appropriately to systematically investigate reality to achieve reliable results and sound conclusions. Bahá'ís who are involved in

various disciplines—economics, education, history, social science, philosophy, and many others—are obviously conversant and fully engaged with the methods employed in their fields. It is they who have the responsibility to earnestly strive to reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work. (Letter dated 24 July 2013)

In light of this guidance and related material studied at the methodology seminars, we decided to reflect on the role of Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs), which have become a ubiquitous methodological tool in empirical economics, particularly in the sub-field of development economics. Beginning with the so-called “credibility revolution” in the 1980s, economists began shifting away from the search for big principles about how the economy works and toward the search for programs and policies that achieve specific economic goals. Empirical methods used by economists today usually aim to statistically estimate the causal impact of a policy or intervention on material outcomes, and RCTs are often framed as the “gold standard” against which all other quantitative program evaluation methods are measured. At the ABS Methodology Seminars, academics from various social science disciplines noted that RCTs and other experimental and statistical methods from economics were influencing their fields, and that they felt pressured to adopt similar methods.

While acknowledging the great benefits of RCTs—indeed, modern-day medicine relies on similar experimental methods to develop and evaluate vaccines, medications, and various other medical treatments that have greatly improved the quality and length of human life—we were concerned about whether the approach was consistent with Bahá'í teachings. Some of us (the author included) had been personally involved with organizing and managing RCTs in developing countries—and had benefited from the resulting data—but felt some discomfort with the approach, at least as it was utilized in development economics research.

Our examination of the RCT methodology revolved around several related questions: When is an RCT a valid research method (such as when testing the effectiveness of a vaccine) and when might it be less useful or relevant? Do RCTs promote a certain mode of thinking that emphasizes outcomes over processes, crowds out other important types of research, and leads to objectification of human beings? Considering our fundamental belief in the oneness of humankind and the conviction that everyone should participate in knowledge generation and be considered a protagonist in his or her own spiritual and material development, is experimenting on others—particularly in poorer countries—consistent with this belief?

Our group's approach was to meet regularly—often once or twice per month for an hour or so—to reflect on passages from the Bahá'í writings

and texts from authors in the field, gather notes, and begin writing a document (*Experimental Approaches to Knowledge Generation in Economics*) in preparation for sharing our thoughts during an upcoming ABS seminar and at the 2021 ABS Conference. We recognized that there were many critics of the RCT approach—both within and outside the economics discipline—so we did not want to simply repeat what had already been stated by others. We wanted to explore this topic in light of some Bahá'í teachings that seemed particularly relevant, and focus on raising preliminary questions for reflection and consultation. After framing and motivating the topic and spending some time reviewing the history of how the RCT became so prominent in mainstream economics, we considered three Bahá'í teachings or concepts that seemed most relevant for examining the RCT method: 1) Means should be consistent with ends; 2) Participation and the oneness of humankind; and 3) The nature of knowledge.

Regarding the first point, the document recognizes that knowledge generated from RCTs has greatly improved human wellbeing. (Indeed, even while writing the document many of us were benefiting from the COVID-19 vaccine developed through the use of experimental methodologies.) But we also recognized that the means of generating knowledge must be consistent with its ends. For instance, in a message to the Bahá'ís of Iran, the Universal House of Justice writes:

In choosing areas of collaboration, Bahá'ís are to bear in mind the principle, enshrined in their teachings, that means should be consistent with ends; noble goals cannot be achieved through unworthy means. Specifically, it is not possible to build enduring unity through endeavours that require contention or assume that an inherent conflict of interests underlies all human interactions, however subtly. (Letter dated 2 March 2013)

In the medical context, there have been many experiments involving human beings that are clearly morally meritorious. For instance, it would be very dangerous to administer a vaccine to millions of people without first running a trial on a smaller group to determine its safety and efficacy. But other historical medical experiments were clearly unethical, with means that were far from consistent with their ends. The example of the Tuskegee study, in which experimenters deliberately withheld diagnoses from African American men infected with syphilis in order to study the progression of the disease, amply demonstrates this point.⁵

Most RCTs in economics today might be described as falling in between these two extremes. They seek to test the effectiveness of a program or policy at improving some dimension of wellbeing. This involves withholding

the program from a randomly selected group, which may be unethical if the program is known in advance to be very beneficial to everyone. Often, the government or NGO running the program does not have the resources to include everyone, so invitations are allocated by lottery. The economics profession largely accepts this as an ethical protocol, especially when the merits of the program are unknown or unproven within a certain context.

After reflecting on the above concepts, the document then poses the following questions:

- If randomization is deemed appropriate and worthwhile in vaccine trials, are there economic or social scientific trials where this might also be the case?
- If implementers believe from personal experience that a program is valuable, then what are the moral implications of producing a particular kind of evidence by withholding that program from some people at random? Does this imply that there are different ways of “knowing” something?

The document then reflects on questions related to participation. Even in cases where the researcher knows that the program does no harm and does not know whether it causes benefits—in other words, there is no evidence that either group in the randomized trial will be disadvantaged relative to the other—randomized trials can be

⁵ For details, see Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “The Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline.”

conducted in a highly non-participatory fashion—even when informed consent is collected. A prominent critique of the experimental methodology in development economics is that studies are disproportionately implemented by individuals based in prestigious, Western academic institutions, who experiment on individuals in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia as the subjects of study. While these global power relationships are not new nor unique to experimental economics, the research approach has manifested these deep, historical patterns in particularly salient ways. Many development interventions are funded by outside donors who usually ask for evidence of effectiveness before they invest a great deal of resources in the program. Local organizations are then responsible for presenting evidence of the efficacy of their programs in order to receive resources from outside donors. And many donors require this evidence to be generated by a randomized trial.

We then pose the following questions related to participation:

- How might the interplay of responsibility to outside organizations—and carrying the burden of proof—be organized in order to emphasize local agency and learning rather than relegating it to the margins?
- Of particular concern is the attitude and spirit of the experimental process. Do protagonists of development “experiment on” themselves or on their

brothers and sisters? For that matter, to what extent is the experimental approach contingent on governance structures that treat citizens as anonymous (or “others”)? What does the proper attitude look like in practice and how does it affect implementation? If the experimental approach is problematic, does the problem lie in the methodology or in broader structures in society?

- Can we imagine a fully participatory randomized controlled trial? What are its characteristics? Is there something inherently non-participatory about randomization? Is the methodology more or less participatory than approaches in which researchers analyze pre-existing quantitative datasets (collected by, say, the census bureau of a nation)?

Finally, the document considers the nature of knowledge and the kind of knowledge that RCTs aim to generate, and discusses how this differs from other methodologies. Even a series of well-run RCTs is limited in the kinds of insights it can provide. At their best, RCTs generate information about the causal impact of a specific event or action on quantifiable outcomes in a specific context and point in time. This is a very narrow focus. Clearly a process that seeks to improve human wellbeing will need many kinds of knowledge and information generated

by a variety of research methods. This point is not lost on many researchers who implement RCTs, many of whom also use more qualitative methods to refine quantitative measures and test mechanisms that underlie the quantitative results in their studies.

RCTs are used not only to generate knowledge but also to communicate it according to certain standards for empirical evidence. Local implementers who observe a program to be effective in their own experience and wish to communicate that fact in a way that is legible and credible to those with little experience often rely on evidence from randomized trials to do so. This may be due to the perceived replicability of the results, which suggests a relatively high degree of objectivity. We might wonder, though, what is lost along the way and how other means of communication and knowledge generation can complement or replace insights communicated via RCTs.

Related reflection questions in this section include the following:

- What are the ideal conditions within which RCTs can be most effective at contributing to the generation of veritable knowledge? Assuming these conditions are met, what kinds of insights or perspectives might this method usefully generate?
- How might RCTs work in concert with other methods to generate knowledge about the pursuit of economic development or material well-being?
- Closely tied to these questions is our understanding of the nature of social reality. Let us accept that social reality is dynamic and is currently in the midst of a transition towards a mature human race. Are RCTs a tool that, at this point, assist humanity in transitioning towards its next stage of maturity? Generally speaking, how might we situate RCTs as a methodology in the context of this process of transition?

After sharing *Experimental Approaches to Knowledge Generation in Economics* with participants in the ABS Methodology Seminars, a subset of us offered the presentation “Reflections on the Use of Randomized Controlled Trials” at the 2021 ABS Conference. We mainly focused on reviewing the RCT methodology and the history of how it became so prominent, and reflected on the above questions with conference participants. As a relatively new initiative moving at a slower pace than some other ABS initiatives, this sub-group has mostly focused on raising questions and gathering insights from various Bahá'í writings and works by other authors. Going forward, the group hopes to continue its exploration of economics methodologies and questions related to the generation of knowledge. For example: Why do economists care so much about knowledge of causal relationships as opposed to other types of knowledge? What are the boundaries

of causal claims, and how can we identify them? Do we need to use RCTs and sophisticated statistical techniques to determine causality? Or can other methods—such as reflection, observation and consultation—also provide inference into cause and effect, and generate important knowledge? What other types of knowledge have been useful for individual and community development, such as observation, personal reflection, shared wisdom, stories, narratives, etcetera? What can we learn from the Bahá'í community's experience with knowledge generation, which is mostly based on the process of action, reflection, consultation, and reference to authoritative guidance? What do the Bahá'í writings say about knowledge and the various ways of knowing?

SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to participating in perhaps four or five different versions of ABS economics groups, over the past five years the ABS sub-group I am currently involved with has held five seminars on *Engaging Introductory Economics from a Bahá'í Perspective* in various settings (including two in person at ABS conferences and three in virtual spaces) with approximately sixty to eighty total participants. As other ABS working groups may consider embarking on similar initiatives, in this section I share some reflections on a few practical considerations. The reflections are mostly related to our sub-group's work on engaging the Economics 101

discourse, since this was by far the longest sustained effort I was involved with. But I include insights from other groups as well, where relevant. As always, these are merely humble personal reflections and other ABS groups may have different and equally relevant perspectives, based on the dynamics of their groups and disciplines.

EXAMINING A DISCOURSE: WHERE TO BEGIN?

One constant question that arose—especially during the early years—was where to begin examining a discourse. For example, early on we spent months reading the nearly 700-page book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* and found it fascinating and insightful. But ultimately it represented merely one individual's viewpoint—one that was in fact quite distinct from mainstream economics. Is this book representative of the discourse on inequality? Are there other ways of approaching a discourse that might cover more distinct viewpoints? Is the way to examine a discourse simply reading and compiling differing viewpoints? While these questions largely remain unanswered (at least in my mind), our group found it helpful to think about the specific discourse related to the Economics 101 curriculum. Once we made the decision to accompany young Bahá'ís studying undergraduate economics, the discourse we were engaged with became much clearer. We simply decided to examine the most commonly used undergraduate economics textbook,

Principles of Economics by Gregory Mankiw. While this is only one of many undergraduate economics textbooks, we knew that it was among the most popular, and we confirmed that other undergraduate textbooks largely covered the same topics and in a very similar manner. Thus, as we wrote our document we quoted, referred to, and examined Mankiw's presentation of economics concepts and models, and we were confident that this was a fairly accurate representation of the discourse that young undergraduate students study. We then read and drew on a few books and articles that seemed to provide relevant alternative perspectives and critiques of the Economics 101 curriculum, such as James Kwak's *Economism*; *The Moral Economy* by Samuel Bowles; *The Dismal Science* by Stephen A. Marglin; *What Money Can't Buy* by Michael Sandel; and the articles "On Ethics and Economics" by Amartya Sen and "A Critical Review of *Homo Economicus* from Five Approaches" by Dante Urbina and Alberto Ruiz-Villaverdes. But the purpose of drawing on these other resources was not to exhaustively examine the economics discourse—a seemingly impossible task—or to look for ways to pick apart and criticize the Economics 101 curriculum. We simply wanted to draw on relevant insights, context and examples from other economists that shared similar views and had invested much more time and energy than us in critically examining the Economics 101 curriculum.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS AROUND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

The process of collaboratively writing the Economics 101 companion document—a roughly forty-page manuscript—was quite challenging. We wanted to make sure that it was an accurate reflection of our collective understanding and process of study, reflection and consultation, but ultimately only one person could write at a time. Often, an individual's understanding would not fully reflect the consultation of the group. In this regard, we found that developing a unified vision through regular consultation, reflection and note-taking was extremely helpful. Occasionally, we would neglect to take notes, but then would realize that we were often repeating the same points again and again. The simple process of note-taking was very helpful in avoiding this repetition, and allowed us to make better progress. We would then have a volunteer lead writer create the first draft of a section based on our consultation and notes. This draft would be circulated to the other members for review, and we would often have one person review and edit the entire document for clarity. Now and again, we would also review parts of the document together as a group and discuss any differences of opinion. It was particularly useful to reflect on the main points that we wanted to get across in each section of the document, especially as we were preparing for the seminars. After each seminar, we would immediately reflect on areas where participants

struggled with the material, or where the document or conversation went off point, and make updates based on this reflection. After a while, we found that the updates were relatively minor, and the document appeared to be achieving its goal of building the desired capacities. Finally, one particularly helpful approach was to gather in person to write intensively over a weekend. In these spaces, we would create an outline and overview of what we wanted to write together, then go into separate rooms to write, and then come back to read what had been written together on a shared screen. This process would be iterated several times over the weekend. We found that during these weekends we could make tremendous progress in just a couple of days, often more than what we might accomplish in a year of meeting once or twice per month. Meeting in person also helped strengthen bonds of unity and friendship as we had meals together, enjoyed informal conversation, and met each other's families, which further helped sustain our efforts.

FACTORS SUPPORTING SUSTAINED EFFORT

While many sub-groups of the economics working group were unable to continue for various reasons, our group of four or five individuals has been able to continue learning together for about five years, despite members moving, getting married, having children, studying in PhD programs, and serving intensively in various community

building and administrative capacities. How were we able to sustain this group, despite the great demands on each individual? Although the regularity of meetings has ebbed and flowed (meetings mostly occurred once or twice per month for sixty to ninety minutes, but we often met more regularly when a seminar was approaching), several elements have helped maintain the continuity of the group. For one, having a practical service component has helped motivate the group members. There seems to be something powerfully inspiring in having a concrete view of who we are serving and accompanying through our efforts (for example, young Bahá'ís studying economics), as opposed to simply engaging in an intellectual exercise. Relatedly, having deadlines for upcoming seminars or ABS conferences created clear due dates for when we would review and refine our document, and often pushed us to intensify our efforts when necessary to prepare for facilitation. Second, there is a strong unity of thought among the group members, partly because we have all studied the ISGP materials and are actively involved in the Bahá'í community-building process, but also because the group spent a significant amount of time and energy during its early stages in developing unity of vision. For example, one exercise that we found helpful was to create a list of goals for the seminar and capacities we wanted participants to develop, such as the capacity to "sift" the economics discourse, the habit of going to the Bahá'í writings for guidance, the

capacity to avoid an overly critical attitude, and the ability to see an idea or concept in terms of its best possible interpretation. Once this list was created, we could refer to it to ensure that the various elements in our document were related to one or more of these objectives. As mentioned briefly above, while straightforward, it was also helpful to designate someone who would organize the meetings, take notes and send out reminders. Finally, we did our best to humbly approach our work in a spirit of learning, understanding that our effort is part of a much longer process that will continue for generations, and with faith in the ongoing process of action, consultation, reflection, and continual turning to the guidance outlined by the Universal House of Justice.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTIFYING A TARGET AUDIENCE

Finally, one question that we spent much time pondering was: who is our target audience? When writing the document, we found it very useful to reflect on who we were addressing. At first, we found that we all had differing views of who we were writing for. Sometimes we would write as if we were communicating with undergraduate university students with little economics training, and then we might write—often unknowingly—very technically as if our audience consisted of master's or PhD students. Sometimes we wrote as if we were writing directly to deepened Bahá'ís, while at other times we wrote as if addressing a more

general audience with little background in the Bahá'í Faith. Upon reflection, we noticed that who we thought we were addressing with our document had major implications for how we would write, and what we assumed the reader already knew or believed. Ultimately, we decided that the document is primarily intended for young Bahá'ís and like-minded individuals studying economics at university, which made it easier to assume that the reader had a basic understanding of Bahá'í teachings, faith in Bahá'í principles as solutions to the world's problems, and confidence in the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. We could also assume at least a basic familiarity with economic principles and models (although we still spent a fair amount of time reviewing them when we felt it was necessary for context). Yet, in reality, there were not too many Bahá'ís among our immediate contacts that fell into this category, while there were many others outside of our target group that might benefit from the seminars. We thus had to consider questions pertaining to participation. Who should we invite to the seminars? And once our target population was identified, how would we reach them? Early experience suggested that it might not be beneficial to simply open the seminars to everyone that was interested. Often, Bahá'ís that had been immersed in the economics discipline for many years as academics or practitioners had strong views related to economics, and either dominated conversations or took them in a very different direction

than was intended. On the other hand (though this is something of a generalization), younger participants—particularly undergraduate students and young Bahá'ís that had experience with ISGP and the community-building process—seemed much more open to the ideas presented and capable of humbly engaging with the document's path of inquiry. Ultimately, we felt that we should mainly focus on the original target audience of young Bahá'ís studying economics and like-minded friends, and we have in fact had some friends of the Faith join our seminars and contribute greatly to the consultation. To find these young Bahá'ís and friends, we benefited from partnering with ABS and, in some cases, local agencies and institutions, such as Auxiliary Board members and Local Spiritual Assemblies.

CONCLUSION

Since 2013, the Bahá'í community has been blessed with an abundant flow of additional guidance from the Universal House of Justice regarding not only participation in discourse, but also the specific issue of how we conduct our economic life. In one of its messages, the House of Justice reviews many of the challenges facing society brought about by outdated and incomplete models of the individual and society, including inequity, discrimination, exploitation, and environmental destruction:

Unconscionable quantities of wealth are being amassed, and the

instability this creates is made worse by how income and opportunity are spread so unevenly both between nations and within nations. But it need not be so. However much such conditions are the outcome of history, they do not have to define the future, and even if current approaches to economic life satisfied humanity's stage of adolescence, they are certainly inadequate for its dawning age of maturity. There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the interests of all peoples. (Letter dated 1 March 2017)

“With prevailing modes of thought found to be badly wanting,” the letter continues, “the world is in desperate need of a shared ethic, a sure framework for addressing the crises that gather like storm clouds.”

The letter particularly calls on the individual believer to consider the implications of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh for economic behavior as we develop a new model of community life, consider the consequences of our economic choices, and strive to lead coherent lives in accordance with the Faith's lofty ideals. But it also emphasizes how much of the learning about emerging economic structures and related discourses will come from the community-building process in neighborhoods and villages, particularly in clusters where the community-building activities are beginning to embrace large numbers:

The larger the presence of a Bahá'í community in a population, the greater its responsibility to find ways of addressing the root causes of the poverty in its surroundings. Although the friends are at the early stages of learning about such work and of contributing to the related discourses, the community-building process of the Five Year Plan is creating everywhere the ideal environment in which to accrue knowledge and experience, gradually but consistently, about the higher purpose of economic activity. Against the background of the age-long work of erecting a divine civilization, may this exploration become a more pronounced feature of community life, institutional thought, and individual action in the years ahead. (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 1 March 2017)

Thus, as Bahá'ís gain more experience with community building and consider questions of economic activity, we will undoubtedly discover new insights and consider additional implications for the work of contributing to the discourse on economics.

At the recent 2023 ABS Conference—the first in-person conference since before the COVID-19 pandemic—it was heartening to hear the reflections and insights of ABS working groups from a wide variety of disciplines. Although the efforts of our economics group to implement the Universal House of Justice's guidance

often feel halting, haphazard, and laborious, it is also encouraging and exciting to be part of a larger learning process that will continue for generations, with each humble effort yielding fruits for future contributors. Although we do not claim to have learned anything particularly definitive—and future endeavors at contributing to discourse may well lead in very different directions—after reflecting on the last ten years of our group's humble efforts several insights and reflections have emerged that may benefit others on similar paths of service. These include: the importance of simply getting started, and regularly reflecting on action, consulting, and referring to the Revelation for inspiration and guidance; the need to develop unity of thought by dedicating sufficient time to collectively read, consult, reflect and discuss goals and priorities; the importance of creativity, brainstorming and learning from others with more experience to generate ideas and lines of action; the benefit of learning from ISGP's experience with respect to evaluating a system of knowledge and its assumptions, including learning to “sift” humanity's current store of knowledge and identify what is missing; the usefulness of having a practical service component, with consideration for the efforts' target audience; the value of understanding which specific discourse one is contributing to; the need to consider methodological approaches in one's discipline, and examine their underlying assumptions; the significance of understanding historical context, and of maintaining a

long-term perspective on our work; and the value of engaging each idea in terms of its best possible interpretation while avoiding being overly critical of others' theories and approaches.

Going forward, some questions we are reflecting on include: How can our work be more coherent with the community-building process the Bahá'ís are engaging in? How can our efforts both contribute to and learn from initiatives at the grassroots? How can we support youth in advanced communities who are progressing through the institute process but may not come to an annual ABS conference or centralized seminar? How can we further support young people studying and working in economics beyond just the Economics 101 seminar space? How can we accompany them to practically engage in additional discourses related to economics, such as in upper-level economics courses, graduate studies, and their careers? How can we learn from their experience? How can we raise up and accompany new facilitators to expand our capacity to offer more seminars? How can we more rigorously examine methodologies in the economics discipline, and begin to explore methods of knowledge generation that are more coherent with the Bahá'í conceptual framework? For those of us who are in academia and related professions, are there ways to apply and explore these methods in our day-to-day work and research that can engage the greater academic community and related discourses? How do our contributions align with other efforts by ABS (such

as the annual conference), and by ISGP (such as the undergraduate and graduate ISGP seminars)?

As we reflect on the past ten years and consider these exciting questions and the possibilities for future progress, we look forward to the next decade of ongoing action, reflection, consultation and continued learning as we receive additional guidance from the Universal House of Justice, and learn to better apply its wisdom in sifting the economics discourse and accompanying young people on this path.

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