Many articles published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* allude to the institutions and central figures of the Bahá'í Faith; as an aid for those unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, we include here a succinct summary excerpted from http://www.bahai.org/beliefs/bahaullah-covenant/. The reader may also find it helpful to visit the official web site for the worldwide Bahá'í community (www.bahai.org) available in several languages. For article submission guidelines, please visit journal.bahaistudies.ca/online/about/submissions/.

About the Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Faith, its followers believe, is "divine in origin, all-embracing in scope, broad in its outlook, scientific in its method, humanitarian in its principles and dynamic in the influence it exerts on the hearts and minds of men." The mission of the Bahá'í Faith is "to proclaim that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is continuous and progressive, that the Founders of all past religions, though different in the non-essential aspects of their teachings, 'abide in the same Tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech and proclaim the same Faith'" (Shoghi Effendi).

The Bahá'í Faith began with the mission entrusted by God to two Divine Messengers—the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Today, the distinctive unity of the Faith They founded stems from explicit instructions given by Bahá'u'lláh that have assured the continuity of guidance following His passing. This line of succession, referred to as the Covenant, went from Bahá'u'lláh to His Son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and then from 'Abdu'l-Bahá to His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, ordained by Bahá'u'lláh. A Bahá'í accepts the divine authority of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and of these appointed successors.

The Báb (1819-1850) is the Herald of the Bahá'í Faith. In the middle of the 19th century, He announced that He was the bearer of a message destined to transform humanity's spiritual life. His mission was to prepare the way for the coming of a second Messenger from God, greater than Himself, who would usher in an age of peace and justice.

Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892)—the "Glory of God"—is the Promised One foretold by the Báb and all of the Divine Messengers of the past. Bahá'u'lláh delivered a new Revelation from God to humanity. Thousands of verses, letters and books flowed from His pen. In His Writings, He outlined a framework for the development of a global civilization which takes into account both the spiritual and material dimensions of human life. For this, He endured torture and forty years of imprisonment and exile.

In His will, Bahá'u'lláh appointed His eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), as the authorized interpreter of His teachings and Head of the Faith. Throughout the East and West, 'Abdu'l-Bahá became known as an ambassador of peace, an exemplary human being, and the leading exponent of a new Faith.

Appointed Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, His eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), spent 36 years systematically nurturing the development, deepening the understanding, and strengthening the unity of the Bahá'í community, as it increasingly grew to reflect the diversity of the entire human race.

The development of the Bahá'í Faith worldwide is today guided by the Universal House of Justice (established in 1963). In His book of laws, Bahá'u'lláh instructed the Universal House of Justice to exert a positive influence on the welfare of humankind, promote education, peace and global prosperity, and safeguard human honor and the position of religion.

THE JOURNAL OF BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

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ALEA MORREN   "Winged Light." Alcohol ink on Yupo paper, 11" x 14"

From the Editor's Desk

MICHAEL SABET

We are pleased to present the second of two issues featuring authors who participated in a collaborative writing project, centering on the harmony of science and religion. For further background on the project, please see vol. 33 no. 3 of the *Journal*.

As with the previous papers in this collection, the theme of the social dimension of the generation of knowledge remains central. In "'Justly and Without Bias': Consultation as a Technique for Mitigating Cognitive Biases," Andres Elvira Espinosa looks at the many and varied systematic shortcuts in our individual cognitive processes that often prevent us from reasoning accurately. Espinosa canvasses a wide range of studies on the kinds of interventions that can mitigate the tendency of cognitive biases to lead us astray, and argues that the components of successful bias mitigation are reflected in the ideal practice of Bahá'í consultation. In correlating scientific research with the revealed tool of consultation, Espinosa opens the path to seeing the inevitable shortcomings of our individual powers of reason not as flaws in the design of the mind or stumbling blocks in our aspiration to be perfectly rational, but as potential spurs impelling us to see rationality as

a collective as much as an individual phenomenon. Indeed, while "[f]irst and foremost among these favors, which the Almighty hath conferred upon man, is the gift of understanding" (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings XCV), "[t]he maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation" (qtd. in *Consultation* no. 3).

Yet, observers of the Bahá'í community, and at times even Bahá'ís themselves, may understandably feel that the aspiration to "promot[e] the use of consultation for making decisions" in wider society is somewhat naïve (The Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021)? In "Transformative Dialogue: A Key to Elevating Discourse," Roger Neyman and Charlotte Wenninger tackle the challenge of the dysfunctional discourse that seems to be proliferating in many social spaces today, and ask how we might establish the basic kinds of relationships—ones rooted in "love and harmony" and "freed from estrangement"—that are necessary for true consultation to occur (qtd. in *Consultation* no. 10). They reconstruct "Transformative Dialogue," a practical approach grounded in evidence from a wide range of experiences in building constructive relationships for discourse between people predisposed to see each other as "other." This paper will be a valuable resource for those hoping, in the course of this Nine Year Plan, to deepen their understanding of the bases upon which Bahá'í consultation is built, and to extend them to ever wider and more diverse groups of people.

Finally, in "What Does Spirituality Look Like?" Robert Sarracino addresses a premise of all the papers in this collection: that the fruits of true discourse depend upon the expression of spirituality. This spirituality is not a mere abstract commitment to certain metaphysical truths; it is an approach to our life and work, as individuals, members of communities and institutions, that manifests itself in particular attitudes and practices appropriate to a given social context. Sarracino outlines what some of these attitudes and practices must be today, drawing on guidance in the message dated 30 November 2021 from the Universal House of Justice illuminating the characteristics of "the enkindled souls being raised up through the processes of the Plan" who are learning to apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings "to the needs of their society." He then brings us back to the underlying theme of science and religion, making a case for how the social sciences in particular might productively investigate the existence of a spiritual reality in human beings, not by treating this reality as a phenomenon to be directly measured, but by incorporating it as a background assumption whose validity can be progressively evaluated. In both of his central arguments, Sarracino provides a way of thinking about spirituality in eminently practical terms.

As a group, the authors featured in these two issues would like to acknowledge the following people:

In this issue, we are also pleased to feature the poem "Gratitude" by Tahereh Pourshafie and, by Janet Ruhe-Schoen, "Amina Speaks: Night," the endpiece of a series of poems on Táhirih called "Rent Asunder," that grew out of writing Ruhe-Schoen did during the decade she worked on her book *Rejoice in My Gladness: The Life of Táhirih*. Amina, a woman of deep

culture and education, was Táhirih's mother and mentor; the two were very close. Cover art features, once again, a piece by Alea Morren inspired by concepts of transcendence and spiritual transformation: "Winged Light."

Photo credit: Karim Ghantous

You might also like to read...

As a service to our readers, we are including links to articles and books related to the subjects presented in this issue. Articles previously published in the *Journal* are available for free on our website.

THE CONCEPT OF SPIRITUALITY
by *William S. Hatcher*
in *Bahá'í Studies* vol. 11, 1982
https://bahaistudies.cdn.prismic.io/bahaistudies/283737f2-1efd-48c1-9157-e76275460db6_BS11.Hatcher.pdf

IMPROVED ACCESS TO INTELLIGENT RESPONSE USING THE BAHÁ'Í MODEL OF CONSULTATION: TWO EXPLORATORY SMALL-SAMPLE STUDIES
by *John Kolstoe*
https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-7.4.269(1997)

Two studies were conducted to measure the improvement in accessing intelligent responses through the use of consultation. In the first study, eight subjects were given three sets of tasks to be completed as individuals. . . . Comparisons were made between the composite and the group scores. The group did not perform any better in recall of knowledge of a general nature beyond the composite or combined results of its individual members. Improvement was seen in the areas of identifying relationships and practical judgment. The greatest gain was found in the WAIS subtest of comprehension. . . . A second study was conducted to measure the difference between a group that consulted on a task, as compared to individuals with similar background, training, and motivation who performed the same task as individuals. There was a clear advantage shown by consultation as compared to individual results. These results indicate that people consulting together can access intelligent responses superior to that atteined through individual effort. The studies suggest several areas of inquiry for further investigation.

HUMAN KNOWLEDGE AND THE ADVANCEMENT OF SOCIETY
by *Hoda Mahmoudi*
https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-22.1-4.3(2012)

Human knowledge is the means toward realizing a global civilization as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh. This paper examines the concept of knowledge and its treatment in the Bahá'í texts, followed by an exploration of certain themes specified in the Five Year Plan [2006-2011] as brought forward and promulgated by the Universal House of Justice. These themes focus the worldwide Bahá'í community's consultation, reflection, and its efforts towards actions which exercise knowledge in constructing a better world. The paper also explores the individual's adoption of an unassuming learning mode in response to applying acquired spiritual and secular knowledge to the complex and enduring process of civilization building.

Amina Speaks: Night

JANET RUHE-SCHOEN

Fair One, my most cherished and revered
daughter, you wrote to me of meeting
the young Shah: how he held a tiger-striped
cat in his arms, stroked her as he tried luring you
into the belladonna darkness of his eyes.

Strange, in my dream last night a tiger-striped kitten
came to me as I lay before a huge window.

A million stars turned the black sky indigo
and drenched my eyes in their brilliance,
stars that glittered on my brow, wheeled and glistened
on my hair, slid down my burning cheeks like tears,
you and your final torment: buried alive,
yet, at least, safe from violators' hands and eyes.

The burning of the tears became terrible.
I tossed on my mat, tried to scream
but loosed only strangled sounds. White hot flames
licked back against my temples. I thought,
"These flames are like the terror of angels' wings."

Then a tiger-striped kitten walked on silent paws
across my breast. She was nearly weightless,
yet her touch soothed me to the roots of my heart
when she curled up in the crook of my neck
and with one finger I caressed her silken head.
She lay like a warm amber stone on my skin.

The stars lightened, receded, scattered.
Still dreaming, I lay looking at the night,
breathing softly as the kitten breathed.

"Justly and Without Bias": Consultation as a Technique for Mitigating Cognitive Biases

ANDRES ELVIRA ESPINOSA

Abstract

This paper investigates the possibility that one purpose of consultation is the mitigation of cognitive biases in individual participants and in the group as a whole. After exploring the nature of cognitive biases through the lens of evolutionary psychology, the paper surveys existing research on effective methods of "debiasing" individuals. This research suggests that the most effective environment for mitigating bias is a deliberative group, in which individual participants may be asked to justify their reasoning in a social environment of diverse perspectives. Bias mitigation diminishes over time, requiring repeated exposure to the debiasing environment. This model for debiasing strongly resonates with Bahá'í consultation, a conclusion that can enrich Assemblies' and other consulting groups' perspectives on, and expectations of, consultation.

Résumé

Dans le présent article, l'auteur examine la possibilité que l'un des objectifs de la consultation soit l'atténuation des biais cognitifs chez chacun des participants et dans le groupe tout entier. Après avoir exploré la nature des biais cognitifs à la lumière de la psychologie évolutionniste, l'auteur passe en revue les recherches actuelles concernant les méthodes de « débiaisement » des individus. Ces recherches semblent indiquer que l'environnement le plus efficace pour atténuer les biais sont les groupes de délibération au sein desquels les participants peuvent être invités à justifier leur raisonnement dans un environnement social réunissant une diversité de points de vue. L'atténuation des biais diminue avec le temps, ce qui nécessite une exposition répétée à ce type d'environnement. Ce modèle de « débiaisement » s'apparente fortement à la consultation bahá'íe, constat qui peut enrichir les perspectives et les attentes, en matière de consultation, des assemblées et autres groupes qui ont recours à la consultation.

Resumen

Este artículo investiga la posibilidad de que un propósito de la consulta es la mitigación de sesgos cognitivos en individuos participantes, y en el grupo como un todo. Después de explorar la naturaleza de sesgos cognitivos por medio de la óptica de la psicología evolucionaría, el artículo sondea la investigación existente sobre los métodos efectivos de reducir sesgos en los individuos. Esta investigación sugiere que el más efectivo ambiente para mitigar el sesgo es un grupo deliberativo en el cual a los individuos participantes se les puede pedir a que justifiquen su razonamiento en un ambiente social de diversas perspectivas. La mitigación del sesgo se disminuye a lo largo del tiempo requiriendo una repetida presencia del ambiente de disminución de sesgos. Este modelo para la disminución del sesgo resuena fuertemente con la consulta Bahá'í, una conclusión que puede enriquecer la perspectiva y la expectativa que tengan de la consulta las Asambleas y otros grupos consultivos.

What do the minds of a prehistoric hunter-gatherer and a modern urbanite have in common? It has become a common trope that they share a fundamental structure, shaped by evolutionary forces to be adaptive for the hunter-gatherer, yet potentially maladaptive to modern life in many ways. Where the hunter-gatherer was kept alive by a propensity to suspect that every rustle in the grass was evidence of a lurking leopard, for example, this same feature of cognition, carried forward to the modern day, may contribute to superstition, anxiety disorders, and other issues. Our environment has changed with extraordinary rapidity in evolutionary terms, but our brains have not kept pace. As a result, the human mind, for all of its accomplishments in reshaping the planet through science, technology, and social development, remains prone to errors in reasoning. These "cognitive biases"[1] are numerous and ubiquitous, experienced in some form and to some degree by all human beings.

A Bahá'í perspective, which embraces the harmony of science and religion, would agree with the above assessment to a point. A Bahá'í would presumably defer to the scientific understanding that the human brain has been shaped by millions of years of evolutionary pressures. Yet this is not the entire picture. A Bahá'í perspective would also hold that the mind "is the

power of the human spirit. The spirit is as the lamp, and the mind as the light that shines from it" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 55:6). The mind's inextricable relationship to the human spirit is suggested by the fact that "[t]he human spirit, which distinguishes man from the animal, is the rational soul, and these two terms—the human spirit and the rational soul—designated one and the same thing" (55:5). Our rationality—our power to reason—is thus not (or not solely) a byproduct of blind evolutionary forces, but an inherent attribute of the human spirit, which is in turn a fundamental aspect of reality.[2]

Thus, our *embodied expression* of the human mind is determined by the relationship between (at least) two forces: the mind itself, as an essentially spiritual emanation of the human spirit, and the evolutionarily-shaped operations of the brain, with which the mind is "connected" (*Some Answered Questions* 67:6).

How, then, can we act within the world as spiritual beings when the spiritual dimension of our human lives—our ability to reason—is continuously beleaguered by biases, originating in the way our brains have been shaped by evolution, which can never be fully eliminated? And are these two "readings" of the mind in irresoluble

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1   Unless otherwise indicated, "bias" in this paper is used as a shorthand for cognitive biases generally.

2   For a scholarly discussion of the primacy of the spirit in the Bahá'í conception of the human mind, see Filson, as well as Penn for the specific context of mental health. See also Kluge for the Bahá'í concept of human nature more generally.

tension, or is there a way of viewing the evolutionarily-derived condition of the brain, with all its apparent faults, as a coherent part of the Creator's intent to manifest in the physical world creatures capable of expressing "the gift of understanding" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 95:1)?

I argue in this paper that the Bahá'í concept of consultation provides an answer to both questions. Certainly, all participants in consultation should fully expect themselves—and one another—to bring their unconscious biases into the discussion. Yet the Bahá'í writings claim that "[t]he light of truth shineth from the faces of those who engage in consultation" (*Consultation* no. 14) and that "[t]he maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation" (no. 3). The scientific study of human cognition provides us with one way to understand these claims. Specifically, the emerging body of research on cognitive biases reveals conditions under which their effects on our thinking may be mitigated, and individuals successfully "debiased" to a measurable degree. Reviewing the principles and practices governing consultation in light of this research reveals a fascinating possibility: Bahá'í consultation may serve as an interactive and interpersonal debiasing technique for both individual participants and a consulting group as a whole. The Bahá'í writings are not blind to the human tendency to cognitive bias; indeed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's admonition that "[i]n this day, man must investigate reality impartially and without prejudice

in order to reach the true knowledge and conclusions" implicitly acknowledges that partiality and prejudice are ever-present dangers in the investigation of truth (*Promulgation* 32:4).[3] By articulating the approach of consultation, those same writings, I argue, give us a powerful means to overcome the problem of cognitive bias.

In this paper, I review the phenomenon of cognitive bias and the psychological mechanisms that give rise to it, exploring these in light of the Bahá'í writings on human reason and epistemic authority. I then distill the results of cognitive experiments on debiasing, suggesting three major features of an intervention that can mitigate the effects of individual's biases: interaction with feedback, decision justification, and a social environment conducive to debiasing, the last of which includes qualities such as diversity, compassion, suspension of personal judgement, and frequent repeatability. Next, I outline the distinguishing features of Bahá'í consultation. Finally, I argue for the resonance of Bahá'í consultation with the findings of the literature on debiasing. The intent is not to suggest to Bahá'ís that consultation's validity can be measured by its conformity to

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3   Similarly, His counsel to His fellow Persian citizens to "consider . . . justly and without bias" how modernization would help rather than hinder the progress of their nation—the inspiration for this paper's title—can be read as an assessment that the discourse on this question at the time was deficient in justice and impaired by bias ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret* 20).

current scientific findings: while any such conformity may be of interest to a broader audience, Bahá'ís will generally consult out of faith in the method's efficacy, born first from faith in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, and second from experience. However, I hope that insight into the correlations between consultation and the scientific literature may enrich the approach of any participant in a consultation—Bahá'í or not—to this "luminary" and "lamp of guidance" (*Consultation* no. 1).

As a final introductory point, I will give my tentative answer to the second question posed earlier. That question can be rephrased, in a nutshell, as follows: why, from a *spiritual* perspective, do we have (evolutionarily-derived) cognitive biases? The answer is tentative because it is, necessarily, speculative—and as such, it may be most useful as a possibility to bear in mind while reading on.

While many scientists aim to describe both rationality and cognitive bias using purely materialistic models, their placement within the spiritual worldview of the Bahá'í Faith can lead us to a deeply non-materialistic conclusion: that processes for the progressive expression of the human spirit, as defined by the Bahá'í writings, appear to be embedded in the very fabric of physical existence itself. Examined through the lens of a spirituality that accepts an ongoing Progressive Revelation—and a concomitant progressive development of humanity's collective life—it would appear that the originating event of physical reality encoded the

necessity of consultation into the very organization of matter and energy that would eventually result in the formation of human life. The selection pressures that gave rise to rational beings on Earth would also create cognitive bias as a byproduct, which would therefore necessitate something like consultation—as revealed in the Bahá'í writings—as a remedy. Therefore, consultation as a (divinely revealed, in the Bahá'í view) decision-making methodology appears to serve the negentropic[4] role of debiasing communities at all scales to avoid the encroachment of social disintegration caused by the cognitive biases endemic to individual cognition. Reality, in short, appears to be constructed so that human beings will always be in need of each other to more accurately understand the world around them and to produce and maintain an ever-advancing civilization. And simultaneously, as social organization becomes more complex, they require the spirituality emerging from the increasingly sophisticated and harmonious social interactions generated by successive Divine Revelations.[5] Far from leading us to lose faith in the potential of human reason, then, our growing awareness of our own cognitive biases may help us see that human reason reaches its potential when we reason together—that "[t]he

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4   Antonym of "entropic": a change in a system from a state of disorder to one of order.

5   For more on spirituality as a pragmatic and emergent phenomenon, see Sarracino.

maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation" (*Consultation* no. 3).

The Making of a Bias

If one function of consultation is to potentially mitigate cognitive bias, as this paper will argue, then it will first be helpful to consider in more detail the nature of cognition itself, and its epistemic limitations—both from the point of view of the Bahá'í writings, and from that of science.

The Bahá'í writings maintain that the human mind can apprehend reality to a meaningful degree. 'Abdu'l-Bahá frequently praises the use of reason and rationality, citing the rational soul as the single, nonmaterial phenomenon that "distinguishes man from the animal" (*Some Answered Questions* 55:5), and that possesses "[t]he foremost degree of comprehension in the world of nature" (58:3). Through its power, the human being "can discover the realities of things, comprehend their properties, and penetrate the mysteries of existence" (58:3). Yet the writings also delineate the boundaries of human epistemic capacity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "the criterion of the senses is not reliable" (*Promulgation* 3:2), citing instances of illusions stemming from reflections and mirages as proof of the fallibility of sense perception, while "reason . . . is likewise unreliable and not to be depended upon," as shown by the disagreements between rational thinkers on identical subjects and the evolution of knowledge over

time (9:3). Reason alone—for all of its repeatedly proven investigative and practical power—is not infallible.[6]

The Bahá'í position is one of local skepticism: while humans can claim real knowledge about certain things—whether physical or divine—the extent of human ability to attain such knowledge is constrained by both the sensory organs and cognitive bias. Therefore, human epistemic capacity is intrinsically incomplete by nature; we can always know more, but we can never know perfectly or completely.

The scientific research into cognitive bias provides insight into the nature and evolutionary origin of the intrinsic limitations on individual epistemic capacity affirmed by the Bahá'í writings. There are many varieties of cognitive bias, some more widely recognized than others, but all share the quality of being a failure of rational decision-making or problem-solving arising from cognitive "heuristics": "simple procedure[s] that help find adequate, though often imperfect, answers to difficult questions" (Kahneman 98). Perhaps the most cited example is the *confirmation bias*, the tendency of people to search for evidence that validates their preconceived notions and decisions and to ignore or avoid, often

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6   Simultaneously, while the Bahá'í writings affirm that the human mind may occasionally be inspired through flashes of genuine insight, intuition is no more reliable a source of knowledge than sense perception or reason (see for instance Shoghi Effendi, *Prayer and Devotional Life* no. 99).

unconsciously, evidence against those notions (Mercier and Sperber 212–13). But other examples abound. The *representative heuristic*, which may well be the primary source of many social prejudices, causes us to view a single specimen of a perceived category as representative of that entire category (Tversky and Kahneman 1124). The *anchoring bias* causes us to infer a value based on a reference point that is not necessarily indicative of that value (for example, guessing the number of candies in a jar based on the size of a pile of candy wrappers placed nearby) (1128). The *availability heuristic* is the tendency to assess situations or predict outcomes based on whatever similar—but not necessarily predictive—instances can be readily recalled (Kahneman 7–8). The tendency of non-experts to overestimate their competence at a task is known as the *Dunning-Kruger effect*, named after the cognitive scientists who first put the phenomenon to experiment (Tversky and Kahneman 1121, Kruger and Dunning 1131). The *conjunction fallacy*, the *gambler's fallacy*, *base rate neglect*, *sample size neglect*, *perception of randomness* (Barton et al. 68)—their forms vary, but each in some way impedes the human mind's ability to fully exercise its ability to reason and arrive at decisions or understandings that accurately reflect reality.

As suggested above, many biases may have their roots in psychological adaptations evolved to facilitate human survival during the early days of our species, especially in situations necessitating rapid response based on a dearth—or overload—of sensory data (Shultz 20). From the perspective of evolutionary science, human cognition can be modeled as evolving merely to generate a functionally accurate representation of the surrounding environment, and to make predictions accurate enough to keep the individual alive long enough to reproduce; there is no evolutionary drive to make cognition more than "good enough," and so it has not evolved as a mechanism for absolute knowledge (Mercier and Sperber 209–10).

This model helps explain why human cognition is prone to errors. Cognitive biases in particular can be understood in terms of the dual-system model of reasoning widely accepted by cognitive scientists. What we generally think of as "rational thought" is the province of System 2, characterized as slow, effortful, logically analytical, and mostly conscious. Heuristics, conversely, originate in System 1, characterized as rapid, automatic, emotionally or instinctively-based, and mostly subconscious (Kahneman 20–21). System 1 heuristics are evolutionarily adaptive: as mental shortcuts, they lighten the cognitive load (brainpower and concomitant psychological stress) demanded by decision-making in a manner which is meant to reach the same conclusion from complex information (Tversky and Kahneman 1124). Oftentimes, they reach the same conclusion from complex information that it would take System 2 far more time and resources to arrive at. However,

in many cases these heuristics or "intuitions" can lead to systematically inaccurate conclusions and faulty decisions, which slow, cautious, and deliberate analysis of a situation would avoid.

According to this model, while cognitive heuristics evolved to permit us to act in critical situations without being overwhelmed and paralyzed by our own analytical ability, they can frequently become maladaptive in the modern environment where basic survival is often no longer a constant concern. For example, one model of *negativity bias* commonplace in evolutionary psychology characterizes it as having served our ancestors well: those singular individuals most likely to survive were those who learned from experience, and those who learned from experience were those on whom physically or emotionally distressing events made the most impression. It is much more important to remember which berries can cause gruesome death than which ones are harmless; thus, human beings evolved as a species from selected individuals to retain negative information more readily than positive information. However, in a relatively safe modern environment this tendency can instead cause undue psychological stress and inspire pessimism, as we recall tragic events more readily and conclude the world to be worse overall than it actually is (Soroka et al. 18889).[7] But our cognitive biases

do not merely have negative consequences for our own inner lives—our moods and our ability to accurately read reality. To cite but one example, cognitive bias in triage assessments is believed to contribute to around 30,000 preventable hospital deaths per year in the United States alone (Mohan et al. 9207).

Whether they serve us well or not, these cognitive biases seem to be baked into our cognition: we all have them,[8] and we cannot fully excise them. The neurochemical pathways of bias seem to be embedded in our physical bodies and brains. Confirmation bias, to cite but one example, may be related to the effects of the neurotransmitter oxytocin in the brain: it has been found to inhibit changes in belief in test subjects if the subjects receive feedback which is worse than they anticipate, making them receptive

that science denialism arises from a maladaptation of a tendency towards "epistemic individuality"—the overvaluation of one's own deductive reasoning in the absence of conscious understanding that group deliberation is frequently more accurate than individual reflection (Levy 319–20).

8   For example, tests on "inattentional blindness"—a phenomenon where an individual overlooks crucial information while performing a task demonstrate that all persons are susceptible to biases, irrespective of age, sex, gender, culture, attention span, and even scores on several types of intelligence tests. In a famous example of such a test, diverse test subjects tasked with counting basketball passes failed to notice someone in a gorilla costume walking past (Chabris and Simons 31–3).

7   Another, topical example of this kind of maladaptation: some have argued

only to feedback that matches or exceeds their expectations (Ma et al. 9259). Neurochemically speaking, it seems that humans do not enjoy being wrong.

If cognitive bias is inherent and cannot be eliminated, then by what means, if any, can it be mitigated?

The research literature on ways to mitigate bias mostly concentrates on individual reasoning. The suggested techniques[9] that emerge from this research provide ways for individuals to evaluate their own reasoning; yet there is every reason to believe that individuals will be as biased in their self-evaluations as in the original reasoning they seek to evaluate. How can this possibility be avoided?

Mitigating Bias

The research on mitigating bias does provide insights into this question, by highlighting what conditions—including opportunities for interaction and feedback, being invited to justify one's reasoning, and the right kind of diverse social environment—can support individuals in mitigating their own bias.

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9   These include scrutinizing sample sizes to account for extreme statistical results (Kahneman 118), questioning numbers chosen as anchors (126–27), controlling the fear caused by "availability cascades" (143–44), accounting for random chance in successes or failures by "regressing to the mean" to avoid false causality (178–80), referencing actual statistical base rates to derive accurate results from limited information instead of making educated guesses (190), and so on.

Playing against Bias: Interaction and Feedback

There is experimental evidence that interactive experiences that engage individuals in actively considering their own biases are more effective at mitigating those biases than is mere exposure to information about bias. In one study, for example, an interactive "serious game"[10] called MACBETH (Mitigating Analyst Cognitive Bias by Eliminating Task Heuristics) was tested as a means of debiasing intelligence analysts working for the United States government. In MACBETH, the player assumes the role of an intelligence analyst tasked with averting a major terrorist threat by gathering, sorting, and scrutinizing information obtained by international intelligence assets (MACBETH 8–10). The game is designed to force players to confront two targeted biases: confirmation bias, and *fundamental attribution error* (the tendency to attribute others' actions to something innate about them while explaining—and justifying—our own actions based on circumstantial factors) (Dunbar et al. 87). The stakes are high: if the player cannot overcome the unconscious biases that interfere with their search for the truth, then an ambitious terrorist attack on U.S. soil will succeed.

MACBETH proved quantitively more effective in mitigating bias in test

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10   A game (typically a video game) employed for pedagogical purposes by institutions or industries.

subjects than an instructional video designed to raise awareness about the targeted biases. The more the game was played, the greater its effectiveness. Other studies have demonstrated similar successes, and shown that the effect of interactive games on mitigating player biases is sustained over time (Clegg, McKernan et al. 1559, 1565–66; Barton et al. 63–64, 79–80, 81).[11]

These studies highlight two significant advantages of interactive games over non-interactive information in mitigating bias. First, players receive real-time, unambiguous feedback about the in-game consequences of their biases without suffering real-world consequences (Mohan et al. 9207; MACBETH 9). Physiological studies have shown that receiving feedback can activate the reward centers of the brain, providing motivation to continue with a task, however challenging or daunting (Gordon 217–18). Second, video games offer the advantage of replayability, which can enhance this reward effect by motivating players to return to the debiasing game environment, which they would be less likely to do when presented with a video lecture (Clegg, Kenski et al. 11). These features, which induce players to continue engaging with the debiasing content for longer periods of time and more often, may help explain

the long-term impact of these games on bias mitigation. This "inoculative" effect is not typically seen with non-interactive materials.[12] These experimental conclusions strongly suggest that successful debiasing necessitates a strong interactive component, including immediate feedback and the ability to reapply debiasing freely and repeatedly to protect against the continual encroachment of bias.

EXPOSURE OF BIAS
THROUGH EXPLANATION

Research also suggests that asking individuals to explain their positions can effectively reveal cognitive biases, and both motivate and support the individual to overcome them. As noted above, people's tendency to be more confident in their suppositions and assumptions than warranted can itself be thought of as a cognitive bias—the Dunning-Kruger effect (Chabris and Simons 120–22). This overconfidence can in turn rest on other cognitive biases, which inquiry can help to expose. One study tested the effect of a simple intervention on fundamental attribution error. Participants were asked to read essays on affirmative action policies, and then to make a judgement about the author (irrespective of their own

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11   Numerous other studies have shown several styles and types of games to be quantitively more effective than control conditions targeting several bias types (Clegg, Kenski et al. 3–4, 11; Mohan et al. 9205, 9207).

12   For example, in one study "fake news" warnings were found to make test subjects moderately less likely to regard a particular fake article as true, but did not inoculate against motivated partisan thinking as hypothesized; the effect dwindled quickly over time (Grady et al. 12).

stance on the issue). Both the experimental and control groups were told that they would be asked to justify their impressions of the author, but the experimental group was was informed of this accountability *before* being given the essay and background information about the circumstances of the essay's author, while a control group was informed only *after* being exposed to the background information. Participants in the experimental group were less likely to attribute dispositional qualities to the essay author than to consider circumstantial details in judging the author's true position: i.e. they were less prone to fundamental attribution error when told in advance that they would have to justify their conclusions about the author's motivations. Thie findings suggested that this form of accountability motivated participants to think in terms of System 2 processes instead of relying on intuition, which would have been heavily influenced by their own prejudices (Tetlock 232–33).

Research suggests that when people have to explain their positions, it may activate slower, more systematic System 2 cognitive processes (Isler et al. 929, 933). These results are particularly significant in our era of increasing polarization. For example, a study on the illusion of explanatory depth (the tendency to overestimate one's knowledge and understanding about a particular topic) showed that test subjects were less likely to donate money to an advocacy group with which they shared partisan ideology when asked to explicitly justify their reasons for

making their decision (Fernbach et al. 944).[13] These outcomes suggest a possible, surprisingly straightforward debiasing technique: asking people to justify their judgements and positions in detail. Being explicit and candid about the extent of one's own knowledge forces a person to analyze their own thinking more carefully, using complex, time-consuming, but more accurate System 2 processes, rather than quickly thinking through an issue and acting on "gut feeling."

The Social Environment

Social Reasoning and Background Assumptions

Interaction, feedback, and decision justification thus all seem to be elements of an effective bias mitigation technique; and while these might be provided by a computer game or automated prompt, they generally point to a role for social interaction in bias mitigation. This in turn raises the question of what—if any—precise parameters of a social environment are expected to contribute to the mitigation of bias. It is well documented that groups *tend* to

13   Notably, this effect occurred only when subjects were asked to give purely mechanistic explanations of how the policies the group advocated would work in practice, without reference to ideology. When instead asked to justify their ideology, subjects became more extreme in their partisanship and more likely to make only an intrapartisan donation (Fernbach et al. 944).

make better or more accurate decisions than the individuals within them would make alone—a phenomenon that has been referred to as the "assembly bonus effect" (Levy 316). Yet some types of groups have also been shown to tend to become more ideologically radical than individuals, as groups of likeminded people sharing the same assumptions and operating under the same biases can stifle dissenting or cautionary voices under the threat of exclusion or shaming (317). Understanding the qualities of the social environment that contribute to these divergent outcomes is our next goal.

Although the evolutionary origin of human reason is far from settled, some cognitive scientists argue that rational thinking in human beings may have been evolutionarily selected for specifically as a means of *collective deliberation*[14] and not as a decision-making or survival tool for the solitary human person (Mercier and Sperber 113). This line of thinking provides a plausible explanation for the very existence of cognitive bias as a byproduct of human reasoning: if human reasoning ability—overall—were naturally selected for as a means of *collective* cogitation,

then *individual* reasoning is a mere byproduct of this collective neuropsychological phenomenon. It is, in a sense, an ersatz cognitive tool, a secondary function that admittedly proved useful in ensuring the short-term survival of the individual in the absence of fellow reasoners. Again, the individual's cognitive heuristics that give rise to cognitive bias can be very beneficial if one is alone in a survival situation where extensive cogitation—or prolonged deliberation—on urgent issues will likely hinder rather than enhance survival efforts. But if these same heuristics often prove maladaptive in our modern world of complex culture and high population density, a world where we must increasingly generate knowledge through experimentation and experience to address problems our ancestors could not have contemplated, this should be no surprise: it is not only that the world has changed, but that our reason was never *primarily* adapted for individual use.[15]

The possibility that reason evolved as a primarily collective, rather than individual, faculty seems to accord with the fascinating research on our relative capacities for self- and other-assessment. On the one hand, experiments have demonstrated that introspection—defined as self-assessment derived from cogitation on one's own knowledge and thoughts—is

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14   More precisely, reason served the purposes of self-justification (usually *ex post facto*), which permitted individuals to contribute more substantially to collective deliberation for group problem solving (or truth-seeking). Reason thus addressed humanity's need for sophisticated cooperation, and reinforced humanity's prosocial propensities. Mercier and Sperber expand on this school of thought.

15   While this theory is compatible with materialism, it is also, as I have argued, compatible with physical reality being deliberately calibrated to foster human interaction.

inherently undependable as a source of real knowledge or a means of debiasing (Pronin 7, 8–12). Therefore, despite the evolutionary and civilizational success of human reason, reasoning in solitude appears to invite bias, leaving all self-justification as an incomplete source of accurate knowledge.[16]

On the other hand, it is also well-known that people tend to be better at evaluating others' reasoning than their own (Mercier and Sperber 221), and this may partially be due to variations in the relative susceptibility of different individuals to the same cognitive bias, whether in specific or general circumstances. We are all biased, but not necessarily in the same ways, at the same times, and in the same situations. Thus, reason in individuals might serve to contribute to an "interaction engine" powered by the cooperative exchange between individuals evaluating one another's arguments, evidence, and lines of reasoning for their positions (and reputationally motivated to do so with a minimum of nonrational hostility or reactionism) (224). This exchange divides the cognitive load between individuals, relieving each of them of the need to consider all relevant decisional or epistemic factors alone (a burden that can often cause individuals to resort to simplifying heuristics, such as confirmation bias) (257). Debiased group reasoning can thus result from the deliberations of a collection of

diversely biased individuals (219–21). This is likely one reason why human beings also tend to place greater importance on solitary reasoning: this "epistemic individualism" was selected for evolutionarily because a personal connection to our own cogitation made us more capable of enhancing group deliberation by preventing us from thinking uniformly (Levy 319–20).

It is thus clear that one key factor in a social environment conducive to debiasing is diversity. Indeed, one component of the assembly bonus effect is that the decisional or epistemic superiority of the group is not conditional upon any single member having the best answer (Levy 316). A well-functioning deliberative group fosters a dialectic in the broadest sense of the term, a synthesis of ideas and insights resulting in a conclusion that contains elements of various initial contributing theses, with the shortcomings of each removed. This can occur, for instance, when rival scientific schools, possessing the same data but disagreeing on their interpretation, engage in a dialectic through which the background assumptions of their respective paradigms are exposed, and theory is reformulated according to the most viable and reasonable assumptions (Longino 223).[17] Thus, the greater the number

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16   Indeed, one means of overcoming the introspection illusion is simply to actively seek out multiple opinions about oneself from others (Pronin 54).

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17   Consider for example the conflict between two models of human evolution, one emphasizing hunting and male-driven innovation as driving human tool use, and the other emphasizing gathering and female-driven innovation. Each model hinges on background assumptions that are either androcentric or

of differing perspectives offered by a group to the pool of ideas, the more likely it is that participants' background assumptions will come to light and be subjected to a "transformative inter-rogation" (Levy 317, Longino 224).[18] There is, in turn, a direct relationship between the diversity of a group and its likelihood of reaching a better out-come, as greater degrees of diversity permit a wider interperspectival anal-ysis of each individual position on an issue.[19] Individual human beings can draw only from their own experience and knowledge base, and the presence of unreliable introspection coupled with a high degree of cognitive load is a recipe for faulty decision-making. A diverse group can offer myriad expe-riences and knowledge bases to make everyone's unspoken assumptions and beliefs more apparent and open to scrutiny, and once assumptions are rec-ognized they can be interperspectively evaluated for their truth or viability in the context of the group's subject of deliberation, and retained, changed, or discarded as need be (Longino 191). These benefits of interperspectival analysis can easily be translated from the exposure of background assump-tions to the exposure—and remov-al—of biases: it may not be possible for any individual to operate without some bias, but diverse interperspectiv-al analysis facilitates the recognition of biases. Thus, one facet of a proper debiasing environment is the pres-ence of sufficiently diverse individual perspectives permitting the exposure and mitigation of bias. Creating such an environment can potentially maxi-mize the assembly bonus effect while also preventing a consultive group from becoming ideological or extreme through lack of reflection on unaired background assumptions.

While further research on the debi-asing potential of diversity within a

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gynocentric. A dialogue between the two would provide for a means of mediating the flaws in both and synthesizing a more interac-tionist model with greater explanatory power (Longino 106–11). This debate was ongoing when Longino published.

18   For more on the concept of "trans-formative interrogation," see Neyman and Wenninger.

19   The inverse is equally true, as demonstrated by examples from the history of science. When the scientific community has excluded categories of people and their perspectives, it has proven incapable of recognizing and scrutinizing background assumptions, emerging from cultural mi-lieu or motivated thinking. This has histor-ically contributed to, for instance, medical diagnoses of drapetomania (a "disorder" driving slaves to flee captivity) and—more durably—of "female hysteria" (Tasca et al. 113–14, Opara et al. 225). Contrary to the popular perception of science as a "val-ue-free" or "value-neutral" enterprise that divorces all assumptions or beliefs from experimental results, science is properly understood as a process by which objectiv-ity is socially established (Longino 216). See Todd Smith, "Becoming Attuned to

Reality: Presuppositions and the Power of Learning in Action" (55), and Friberg, "Revelation as Scientific in its Method: Science, Diversity, Consultation, and Learning in Action" (25).

group is called for, we can highlight some of the key dimensions of diversity that may be at play. One, already noted with respect to science, pertains to diversity in schools of thought and theoretical paradigms. Another, equally vital to science (see footnote 19) but relevant to other areas of discourse as well, consists of the kinds of identity markers that tend to shape life experience and perspective: race, gender, etc. While diversity along these lines appears to be crucial for a group's capacity to recognize bias (and, as I argue below and as highlighted by Whitney White Kazemipour, should be recognized as a key asset in Bahá'í consultation), we should not dismiss the inherent diversity of perspective between any two individuals. The human brain contains more than 86 billion neurons, capable of configuring into upwards of 100 trillion permutations; that is exponentially more than the number of stars in the Milky Way galaxy, and close to one thousand times the estimated number of human beings who have ever lived and died in the history of our species (DeWeerdt S6, Kaneda and Haub). This makes the brain the most diverse facet of human physiology, offering more permutations than any physical trait (skin color, hair color, facial structure, height, blood type, etc.) or genetic profile combined. As such, while there is as yet no definitive metric to quantify an individual's unique susceptibility to all of the different biases, there is every reason to conclude that different people will likely be more or less prone to different biases, and perhaps even in different circumstances.

Simultaneously, the importance of paying attention to certain markers of diversity in a debiasing space, rather than simply relying on the innate neurological diversity of any group, is inarguable. This can perhaps most easily be seen by considering a different dimension of diversity: culture. Different cultures have varied cognitive, epistemic, and behavioral effects on those within them. Cultural models of the family, for instance, that center on extended families living in close proximity (rather than nuclear families whose members diffuse geographically over time) may lead to organizational models that rely less on formal, impersonal legislature, and more on direct consensus and tradition, as in many traditional African and indigenous cultures (Leary 28, 30). Or consider cultural conceptions of time—as a scarce resource (European, American), an impersonal force that can be accommodated (Chinese), or as a quality of material existence that is to be harmonized with (African) (35–37). Cultures even provide different ways of knowing the world; where science has, over the past few centuries, come to occupy an increasingly central place in "Western" epistemology, many cultures around the world center narrative and storytelling as ways of knowing (Leary 37–38, Shahid 28). Another crucial element of any culture, influencing not only personal relationships but how information is processed in a person's mind, is the

extent to which it emphasizes (broadly speaking) atomistic individuality or communitarianism.[20]

Culture, in short, provides another type of cognitive diversity necessary for a robust interperspectival analysis. In a diverse environment, cultural assumptions and accompanying biases can be scrutinized, selected, or changed for the sake of a more accurate collective understanding, or more apt collective decision.

A final point about diversity: Depending on the nature of the matter under discussion, a diverse group may still need to pay attention to another kind of diversity—diversity of information sources. Just as in scholarship, where reliance on too few sources may impair perspective, lead to crucial information being missed, and make it

less likely that any errors in a single source will be challenged, a group deliberation that relies on too limited or homogenous a base of information may be epistemically limited. A group may be large and diverse enough to potentially enable a rich, interperspectival analysis of an issue, yet if the vast majority of them received their information on the issue from the same source, then the group is, in reality, homogenous in a potentially important respect (Sullivan et al. 734–36). Fortunately, just as interperspectival analysis serves to expose background assumptions and biases, so it can and should be used to expose the degree to which a group is sufficiently heterogenous to avoid groupthink and polarization.

OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given that we all carry around (often unexamined) background assumptions, to achieve greater objectivity (Longino 216; see also Smith), and thus make good decisions, a group must enable diversity to flourish epistemically. This involves more than just bringing together a diverse group of people. What traits, both individual and collective, are most conducive to the free sharing of ideas in a diverse setting?

Indeed, while our hardwired epistemic individualism may, in theory, give us each a personal connection to our own understanding of the world that allows us to productively challenge the views of others, it also tends to make us defensive of our ideas,

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20   Interestingly, however, research suggests that we do not simply regurgitate our culture's dominant stance in this respect. One cognitive study found that priming a test subject using language evoking either an individualist or collectivist mindset altered their memory and perception of a message, the messenger, and the messenger's intended recipient: collectivists tended to retain the message, irrespective of any physical or linguistic similarity shared with the messenger, by drawing greater connections between the three elements (messenger, message, recipient) than primed individualists (Kwon et al. 398). Other experiments have found similar results influencing behavior with similar priming parameters (Oyserman and Lee 329–30), suggesting that degrees of cultural influence can be modified simply through framing.

irrespective of their rational, empirical, or practical merit, to mistake evidence against our ideas as a personal affront, and to resist changing our ideas to suit reality out of a desire to safeguard our perceived self-worth. Epistemic individualism, in other words, can pose a formidable barrier to consensus (Levy 314). The answer is not for members of a group to unthinkingly defer to a majority without presenting their own views, of course, for this would negate the very epistemic promise of diversity. Instead, what is needed is for individuals to have the intellectual humility to recognize the limits of their own knowledge bases and perspectives and consider the possibility that they might be wrong.[21] Consider science: it cannot advance if individuals or groups remain silent about interpretations or theories that deviate from the majority paradigm, but nor is it strengthened when rival scientific communities proclaim their own internal consensuses, champion their own paradigms, standards of experimentation, data collection, and peer review, and "fight it out" with the mainstream scientific community as in a political parliament or congress, where the standard practice is to give

no ground, and maintain that your view is entirely correct and the other side is entirely wrong. The goal of discourse, including disagreement, between scientists must be to reach the point where only a single model or theory most adequately explains a collection of phenomena, consistent with what is known in all other scientific fields; this model then holds until more data, and a more holistic model, can replace it in the future.[22]

How then can the right combination of forthrightness in presenting one's views, and humility in recognizing that they may be incorrect, be cultivated? It is ultimately the individuals in any group who will, in aggregate, create the environment in which a deliberation is to take place. Several studies

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21 Conversely, studies have also shown that the personal quality of hubris, defined as an inordinate faith in one's own personal capability and self-image as being above social convention or formalities, can impair individuals' decision-making, by causing them to be less likely to learn from mistakes, more likely to ignore rules, and more susceptible to the Dunning-Kruger effect (McManus 171–73).

22 To illustrate the difference between presenting an alternative scientific paradigm in good faith, and inflexibly advancing a paradigm with the goal of "defeating" another, consider the Intelligent Design creationism movement, which demands public acceptance as science while discounting critical data favoring natural selection as a viable explanation for observed biological changes in the fossil record over deep time. Such discounting is not the same as exploring the unresolved mysteries of evolution, which are fully acknowledged by mainstream evolutionary biologists. As such, the ID movement has been rejected as science altogether, as it offers no scientifically viable alternative to natural selection as a paradigm. For more on the history, theology, and legal issues of the ID movement see Pennock (2000), Petto and Godfrey, eds. (2007), and Chapman (2007).

have suggested behaviors and attitudes that are most conducive to a debiased discussion. These indirect methods are especially salient in mitigating unconscious biases, as direct attempts to mitigate bias may not address their underlying psychology and may thus exacerbate them (Kahn et al. 132).

Some biases are recognized as originating from the self-regulatory system, the psychological mechanism that preserves an individual's self-perceived worth and integrity (Sherman and Cohen 120). When confronted with data hostile to one's preconceptions and beliefs, this system can respond with motivated thinking and defensiveness. These, alongside epistemic individualism and the introspection illusion, can also contribute to polarization and bias exacerbation. If these tendencies were unavoidable, they might undermine the theory that rationality primarily evolved for collective deliberation. However, while these tendencies can be interpreted as evolution-driven mechanisms for the preservation of the individual, not as assets to controlled and rational deliberation in-and-of-themselves, it turns out that the right kind of social process of reasoning together can mitigate them in individual reasoning. Research demonstrates that test subjects exposed to solid evidence that contradicts their own beliefs are less likely to be hostile to the information, or to suspect bias on part of the information provider, if they are first given an affirmation of their self-identity that is independent of their beliefs or memberships

(121–22). Similarly, short-term inclusionary behavior has been found to be promoted through "perspective-taking" exercises in which subjects are asked to place themselves in the positions of others (Adida et al. 9522, 9524). (Notably, this positive change lasted for only about a week, and only behavioral, not attitudinal, change was demonstrated).

Studies have also found that people are less likely to fact-check statements to which they are exposed (e.g. "fake news") if they are in the presence of others (Jun et al. 5976); since affirmations of individual's inherent worth were absent in these cases, this may reinforce the importance of such affirmations. If people fear ridicule, in other words, they are less likely to adopt their share of a group's cognitive load. In addition to the role this points to for general affirmations of each person's worth, an environment in which members of a group accept each other's mistakes or exposed biases of members may also be important.

One can conclude from these studies that bias can mitigated more effectively as ideas are more freely shared, and that ideas are more freely shared if a diverse group humanizes one another by prioritizing their membership in the category of "humanity" above all secondary identities. In other words, the group that validates its members for simply being human, regardless of what beliefs or identities they bring to the group, creates the possibility of both open sharing and intellectual humility on the part of its members.

Finally, one last facet of debiasing must be considered: bias mitigation has been observed to be an inherently eroding phenomenon that diminishes over time (Gordon 228). This can occur when debiasing successes are misperceived by an individual as a successful inoculation against a bias, which can, in turn, strengthen the influence of that bias on their thinking (Kenyon 2536). Just as inclusionary behavior in the short term can be established through perspective-taking, *sustained* attitudinal changes and bias mitigation seem to require sustained, direct contact with diverse others, allowing a person's biases to become exposed and deeply analyzed (Gordon 228–30, Lilienfeld et al. 395).[23] In short, no means of debiasing can be effective as a single or solitary exercise but must be sustained and reapplied in a social setting to have any meaningful or longitudinal effect (a conclusion also reflected in the research on serious games, as discussed above).

ASSESSING THE DEBIASING POTENTIAL OF CONSULTATION

These studies and analyses have given

us a model of what a strong debiasing technique must involve. It must: 1) be interactive and provide feedback, 2) seek explicit decisional justification when called for, and 3) provide a diverse group atmosphere that a) affirms the value of its constituents, b) permits them to view the world through one another's eyes (perspective-taking), c) forgives faults in reasoning and knowledge base, thereby making fact-checking "safe," d) exposes bias alongside background assumptions through inter-perspectival analysis, and e) is continuously practiced and reaffirmed.

We are now in a position to consider whether Bahá'í consultation meets the criteria of a strong debiasing technique. First, a brief description of consultation is in order.

BASICS OF CONSULTATION

Consultation in the Bahá'í Faith refers to a form of group decision-making and truth-seeking with specific characteristics.[24] It is described as "the lamp of guidance that leadeth the way" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 168); it "bestoweth understanding and transmuteth conjecture into certitude" and "is a shining light which, in a dark world, leadeth the way and guideth" (Bahá'u'lláh, qtd. in *Consultation* 1). 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "consultation

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23   This is especially salient in biases contributing to prejudice against other people. In addition to perspective taking, practices that can mitigate such prejudices include counter-stereotyping (finding examples that defy preconceived notions of people) and expanding one's identity to include *humanity*—that is, defusing one's tendency to tribalism through emphasizing a shared identity with the whole of human personhood (Gordon 228).

24   In this paper, comments and findings regarding consultation should be interpreted as applying to all instances of consultation at all scales, and not only to consultants in the Bahá'í Administrative Order.

must have for its object the investigation of truth" (*Promulgation* 31:2).

Other passages emphasize the distinctive characteristics of consultation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá specifies that "spiritual conference and not the mere voicing of personal views is intended," and contrasts this ideal with the reality of a session of the French senate in which members came to blows (*Promulgation* 31:1). He emphasizes that "[t]he first duty" of the members of a consultative body "is to effect their own unity and harmony, in order to obtain good results. If there be no unity . . . it is better that [the body] not exist" (qtd. in *Star* 114). Discussion of unity as a supreme principle is ubiquitous in the Bahá'í writings on consultation:

> If they agree upon a subject, even though it be wrong, it is better than to disagree and be in the right, for this difference will produce the demolition of the divine foundation. Though one of the parties may be in the right and they disagree that will be the cause of a thousand wrongs, but if they agree and both parties are in the wrong, as it is in unity the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd. in *Consultation* no. 12)[25]

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25   See Whitney White Kazemipour for an extensive discussion of the nature of unity as an ideal in Bahá'í consultation, and its relationship to the necessary "clash of differing opinions" necessary to bring forth the "spark of truth" (*Consultation* 9).

This level of unity depends on members' efforts to bring certain attitudes and qualities to consultation. For instance, participants are expected to each "highly praise the other and each should regard himself as evanescent and as naught in the presence of others" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd. in *Consultation* no. 15). This is a very high standard of intellectual humility and implies adopting a "spirit of learning" over a "spirit of teaching"; in other words, welcoming the possibility of having one's mind changed rather than intending to change other minds.

A distinguishing characteristic of consultation is its goal of achieving a consensus among its participants—whether in matters of decision-making or truth-finding—by opening minds to change through exposure to new ideas, evidence, and perspectives. However, if disagreement persists, a majority vote may be cast with the understanding that all members of the group will support the majority decision even if some of them disagree with it: "When the majority of an Assembly decides a matter the minority . . . should accept this" (*Consultation* no. 41). The justification for this principle is that maintaining unity is more important in the long run than asserting one's view, even if it is correct. Doing the latter can not only undermine the ongoing effectiveness of the group, but it can prevent united action behind a (wrong) decision that will reveal its error, and lead to eventual united recognition of the right course (*Consultation* nos. 12,

15). Thus, consultation extends beyond an egalitarian exchange between diverse equals and incorporates the spiritual principles of unity and harmony; it asks participants to adopt the intellectual humility to be open to change their minds, as well as humble acceptance of any majority vote in faith that any error will be corrected in time. The group's decision feeds back with engagement with reality, testing theory and bringing the group to reevaluate any decisions through further consultation and not through competition between dissenting voices.

Models of debate, discourse, and group decision-making widespread in modern settings—whether in the political realm or in interactions between individuals in quotidian situations—can contain piecemeal elements of Bahá'í consultation,[26] but many also feature adversarial elements in stark contrast to an objective of consensus. With no goal of consensus, decision-making and truth-finding become zero-sum games in which one position must concede to another, or else a compromise made in which no discussant involved fully achieves their goal. Groups adopting these methods, including families, can become estranged over time if individual members refuse to concede (whether out of stubbornness, pride, or genuine belief in the truth of their position) even at the cost of losing group cohesion.

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26   For some examples of these forms of discourse, see Neyman and Wenninger.

CONSULTATION TO DEBIAS

This, in brief, is Bahá'í consultation as it is presented—in the ideal—in the Bahá'í writings and guidance. Consultation is, of course, conducted by human beings, and its execution will therefore often fall short of the ideal. By striving to understand how consultation correlates with the science already reviewed, we may not only obtain a clearer picture of what consultation is supposed to be, but also a means to better achieve that ideal. Here, I aim to make that correlation more explicit, by reviewing each of the three debiasing elements that we extracted from the scientific research and juxtaposing it with relevant authoritative writings and guidance on consultation.

1. *An interactive process providing feedback*

Being a means of deliberation, Bahá'í consultation is an inherently interactive enterprise, thereby fulfilling the first criterion for a strong debiasing procedure as validated by serious game studies. More precisely, consultation incorporates a specific approach to giving and receiving feedback.

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. . . . He who expresses an opinion should not voice it as correct and right but set it forth as a contribution to the consensus of opinion, for the light of reality becomes apparent when two opinions coincide. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 31:2)

These passages can be interpreted as a commentary on feedback. A participant in consultation cannot know how valid their own position is until it is compared with others with which they are unfamiliar, and a posture of intellectual humility demands that they be open to this feedback without becoming defensive and personally attached to their own ideas. Communication between consultants is regulated by the principle of harmony and the goal of group cohesion and truth, which removes a major impediment to any free exchange of feedback.

2. *Explaining one's views*

Once consultation begins, the guidance make clear that the first step in any consultation is that "every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument" (Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 21–22). "[I]t is not only the right but the sacred obligation of every member to express freely and openly his views, without being afraid of displeasing or alienating any of his fellow-members" (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Consultation* no. 32). This can easily be interpreted as an admonishment for all members of a consultative group to

explain and justify their reasoning in the course of deliberation, and provide whatever evidence is relevant to the subject of discussion—the second criterion of a robust debiasing technique.[27] Although not framed in the guidance in these exact terms, this open expression provides an opportunity for biases to be exposed, as a thorough voicing of a participant's reasoning permits them to realize more fully where their thinking is biased and to correct themselves while engaged in deliberation with their peers. That participants are already admonished to "immediately" accept any previously expressed view they find "more true and worthy" prevents the deliberation from becoming polarized and devolving into a zero-sum competition with winners and losers instead of an attempt to reach consensus. In addition, the understanding of a consultative body from the outset is that all proffered thoughts are contributions to group deliberation, and as such no individual will retain credit for whatever collection of ideas are implemented, divorcing the position from the person holding it and removing a critical catalyst for biased or motivated thinking.

3. *Group diversity*

The science has also shown us that, in general, group deliberation tends to be quantifiably superior to individual cogitation and introspection, and the

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27   Note that this may not be expressly necessitated in every consultation; in cases where no objection is raised or elaboration requested, explicit decisional justification may be considered redundant.

guidance on consultation fully bears this reality out. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "[t]he purpose of consultation is to show that the views of several individuals are assuredly preferable to one man, even as the power of a number of men is of course greater than the power of one man" (qtd. in *Consultation* no. 16). Further, on the subject of the mechanism of deliberation, 'Abdu'l-Bahá specifies that "[t]he shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions" (*Selections* 44), and that "[t]hrough the clash of personal opinions . . . the spark of truth is often ignited, and Divine guidance revealed" (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Consultation* no. 33). This praise of heterogeneity, of diversity of opinions, and of general differences between people as necessary for consultation is fully congruous with the concept of interperspectival analysis and transformative interrogation, and suggests that consultation is capable of replicating some of the essential elements of the epistemic success of science in matters both complex and quotidian. Since, as described above, such a deliberate "clash" of opinions and positions can result in the exposure of background assumptions and cognitive biases, there is every reason to believe that this is one unstated goal of the Bahá'í model of consultation, especially given the ability of interperspecival analysis to permit groups to isolate and eliminate or alter their assumptions. Consultation's mechanism for harnessing diversity of opinions illuminates the claim that "the views of several

individuals are assuredly preferable to one," which in turn suggests agreement with the cognitive scientific account of human reason as evolved toward group deliberation and problem-solving.

Beyond stressing the importance of diversity, the Bahá'í writings and guidance also encourage certain behaviors and attitudes in individual participants that foster a deliberative environment conducive to bias mitigation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, for instance, that "[t]he first condition [for consultation] is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of the assembly . . . wholly freed from estrangement . . . for they are the waves of one sea, the drops of one river, the stars of one heaven, the rays of one sun" (*Selections* 45). This principle of love and harmony protects each participant's freedom to express themselves "without being afraid of displeasing or alienating any of his fellow-members" (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Consultation* no. 32), and is reflected in the admonition that "it is in no wise permissible for one to belittle the thought of another" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 45). This implies an atmosphere of acceptance, in which people are not judged for their positions but are accepted wholeheartedly by virtue of being fellow human beings, regardless of their beliefs of biases.[28]

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28   This role of loving acceptance of others in consultation may illuminate the juxtaposition in Bahá'u'lláh's Writings of "consultation and compassion," which He specifically designates as the "two luminaires" of the "heaven of divine wisdom" (*Tablets* 168).

As such, this leaves ample room for informal perspective-taking in a consultation. An atmosphere of forgiveness may also be instrumental in promoting the willingness of consultants to fact-check one another—without, of course, "belittling" each other's views: "[s]hould any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd. in *Consultation* no. 9). If the unspoken agreement among participants is that there is to be no fear of "displeasing or alienating" each other, then there will be less fear of being wrong among peers and thus a freer exchange of ideas.

The writings and guidance on consultation also affirm the role of intellectual humility, and warn against hubris. Participants in consultation are to "proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd. in *Consultation* no. 10). As noted above, they should "highly praise the other and each should regard himself as evanescent and as naught in the presence of others" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd. in *Consultation* no. 15), and should furthermore remember that "[a] thousand people may hold to one view and be mistaken, whereas one sagacious person may be right" (*Promulgation* 31:2). They are reminded that "[n]ot infrequently, nay oftentimes, the most lowly, untutored, and inexperienced among the friends will . . . contribute a distinct and memorable share to a highly involved discussion"

(*Consultation* no. 25). In the case of Spiritual Assemblies, the guidance even approves the involvement of outside experts who can contribute to the Assembly's deliberation as disinterested, non-voting parties (*Consultation* no. 27). Such a disinterested expert can help to broaden the consultation's knowledge base and strengthen its epistemic network without unduly influencing the outcome. In addition, the very fact that Bahá'ís are told that "[i]n all things it is necessary to consult" (Bahá'u'lláh, qtd. in *Consultation* no. 5), that "[m]an must consult on all matters, whether major or minor, so that he may become cognizant of what is good" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd. in *Consultation* no. 14), and that "consultation is desirable and acceptable in all things and on all issues" (no. 16), suggests that we are being admonished to continuously debias, in our personal, professional, and administrative roles. As we have seen that debiasing is an eroding phenomenon, no amount of consultation will ensure that a participant emerges durably and permanently debiased. Instead, the participant must continuously re-expose themselves to this environment to maintain the greater awareness that consultation is expected to produce. All of these facets of the ideal social environment of consultation are congruous with the experimental results recorded above.[29] Thus,

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29   It should be noted that as Bahá'ís believe the Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to originate from a Being of superior understanding who created humanity (God), it would therefore be expected that the knowledge of cognitive bias would be embedded in

when consultation is conducted in line with the admonitions in the Bahá'í writings and guidance, it will serve the purpose, amongst others, of mitigating the effect of bias on the individual participant and the consultative body.

Of course, there should be no expectation that every instance of consultation will successfully expose all participants' biases, and result in a decision that is perfectly reflective of truth. Indeed, the admonishment to unite behind all decisions, discussed above, clearly contemplates that decisions will sometimes be wrong. As discussed by Friberg in the previous issue of this journal, when consultation is integrated into a mode of learning in action, in which all consultative participants unite behind collective determinations—whether reached by consensus or majority vote—it contributes to a social process that can meaningfully be called scientific. From the perspective of consultation's debiasing potential, the iterative nature of this process is crucial. The critical search for background assumptions and biases cannot, practically speaking, be prolonged indefinitely in any given consultation, and as such a consultive group must establish a threshold by which this reflection ceases, and practical decisions made based on the information available (Longino 223), even if consensus has not yet been reached. Bahá'í consultation does not ask people to submit

blindly to the dictates of a majority; rather it exhorts participants to embody humility and deference to the practical considerations of decision-making, in faith that errors will be corrected in time. And this, in my view, includes errors of bias. We have seen that the conditions for robust debiasing are potentially demanding; where sufficient diversity of the relevant kind is lacking, for instance, bias can persist even if all the other conditions for debiasing are present. And this can be the case in Bahá'í consultation, and in the Spiritual Assemblies that adopt it as a methodology. The continuity of community—the commitment to continue to strive for both loving harmony and "[c]onsultation, frank and unfettered"—both rests on faith that such biases will eventually be exposed and overcome, and makes this resolution possible (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Consultation* no. 27). Should a consultative body perform consultation as the Bahá'í guidance presents it, then its constituents will also be open to new data gathered from whatever decision they enact, as well as to repeated consultation on the subject to strengthen their ability to execute their decisions. Because even a finalized decision remains open to revision in light of feedback with reality, in terms of observable successes, failures, and potential alternatives and enhancements, a continuity is observed which enables a faith in the corrective power of consultation. This is the experimental method applied beyond the laboratory, in which feedback from observations leads to new conclusions to

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the admonishments to consultation contained therein in anticipation of the intrinsic nature of bias in human reasoning.

broaden and deepen the pool of human knowledge, and a demonstration of one way in which the Bahá'í Faith is "scientific in its method" (Shoghi Effendi *Letter to the High Commissioner*).

<div align="center">CONCLUSION</div>

The Bahá'í Faith accords the utmost importance to consultation as the means for discovering truth in a non-adversarial manner that unites and harmonizes human beings. I have argued that one essential goal—if not the primary purpose—of consultation is maximize its participants' epistemic strengths and minimize their inherent cognitive weaknesses. Specifically, consultation can remove barriers to truth by mitigating the effect of cognitive bias on the human psyche, and exposing biased thinking through the sharing of heterogenous perspectives. The description of consultation in the Bahá'í writings and guidance suggests a cooperative investigative scheme fully congruous with the latest findings in cognitive science and experimental psychology, demanding interaction and social epistemology as integral components to the truth-finding endeavor. Consultation necessitates interaction, feedback between its members, explicit explanation and justification by individuals, interperspectival analysis from as diverse a group as possible, a harmonious and united atmosphere based on a shared human identity, and continuous practice to continually reestablish bias mitigation.

The scientific research I have reviewed suggests ways in which we may enhance our understanding of the procedures prescribed in consultation. Bias is an inalienable quality of the human experience, selected for our basic survival and persisting inexorably in an era of ever-advancing civilization. For this day and age, consultation is the means to mitigate that ineliminable facet of our existence and give the whole of humanity—across cultures, faiths, and perspectives—greater and more participatory access to truth. Further research may expand this conclusion and build upon the possibility that human reason always evolved as a collective enterprise, intractably flawed without group deliberation and thus providing an impetus towards human unity and the spiritual strengths which follow from it.

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Gratitude

TAHEREH POURSHAFIE

In memory of Oosta Nasir

My father threw bricks for a living.
He taught me how to use a hand trowel to finish the concrete,
water the wall of straw bale until it perfumed the air.

Early mornings, I stood by his side and tended his planted garden.
One day's lesson, recited in poetry, was about the small, crooked tree:
"درخت از کوچکی چون جوله برداشت بزرگ که میشود کی میشود راست".[1]

When he said, "My father didn't send me to school,"
I made my own classroom and taught the trees in the house to blossom,
mulberry trees, grape trees, Buxus shrubs.

The wind was a hazard; it moved my students, the leaves.
They had to be disciplined for speaking. They had to learn the lessons
my father taught me, which I wrote on the house entrance door.

Summer holidays, I held his callused hand to work.
I wanted to help, to clean the desks, but he wanted me to fly.
Facing the Qiblih, I stood beside him and repeated the Namaz.

I mirrored his genuflections, memorized the Obligatory prayer,
before I was forced to fly from the fires to a far-off land
where it was safe to be educated.

I no longer pluck the grapes full of ants, boil the home
planted corns, hold the sheets under the berry trees as they shake.
I no longer speak with the monkey flowers, picnic beside the dark,

wet soil with a vibrant green plant. But I hear his voice.
My father wanted me to fly to a far-off land where I could be safe,
where I could be educated in all the worlds of God.

But I will fly back to him after the fruit of my own trees
has blossomed, blazed and fallen.

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1   "How can a young sapling that is slanted, grow upright?"

Transformative Dialogue: A Key to Elevating Discourse

ROGER NEYMAN and
CHARLOTTE WENNINGER

Abstract

The Bahá'í writings prescribe consultation "on all matters," and specify not only the broad shape of the consultative process, but the prerequisite attitudes of those seeking to consult. But what is to be done when these prerequisites are lacking—when, for instance, people seem unable or unwilling to even understand each other? A similar challenge confronts public discourses, many of which appear fundamentally dysfunctional. In this paper, we canvass current research to identify elements of a process that can facilitate understanding among dialogue partners. The resulting "Transformative Dialogue," which aims primarily at transforming relationships, can potentially lay the groundwork for true consultation. We argue that TD is a distinct mode of dialogue, embodying a recognizable set of precepts and processes, and can therefore be studied, systematically developed within local communities, and applied to specific problems within those communities.

Résumé

Les écrits bahá'ís prescrivent la consultation « sur tous les sujets » et précisent non seulement la forme générale du processus de consultation, mais aussi les attitudes que doivent avoir ceux qui cherchent à se consulter. Mais que faire lorsque ces conditions préalables font défaut – lorsqu'il semble, par exemple, que les gens ne peuvent pas ou ne veulent pas se comprendre? Le même défi se pose pour les discours publics, dont un grand nombre semblent fondamentalement dysfonctionnels. Cet article passe en revue les plus récentes recherches afin d'identifier les éléments d'un processus susceptible de faciliter la compréhension entre partenaires d'un dialogue. Le « dialogue transformateur » qui en résulte, et qui a pour principal objectif de transformer les relations, pourrait jeter les bases d'une véritable consultation. Nous soutenons que le dialogue transformateur est un mode de dialogue distinct, qui intègre un ensemble identifiable de préceptes et de processus, et qu'il peut donc être étudié, développé de manière systématique au sein de communautés locales, et appliqué à des problèmes concrets au sein de ces communautés.

Resumen

Los escritos Bahá'ís prescriben la consulta en "todos los asuntos" y especifican no solamente la forma amplia del proceso consultivo, sino las actitudes como condiciones previas para aquellos que buscan consultar. Pero, que hay que hacer cuando estas condiciones están ausentes-cuando, por ejemplo, la gente no parece estar en capacidad o tener deseo de ni siquiera entenderse uno al otro? Un reto similar se presenta en discursos públicos, muchos de los cuales parecen fundamentalmente no funcionales. En este artículo, examinamos la actual investigación para identificar los elementos de un proceso que puede facilitar el entendimiento entre los que buscan dialogar. El resultante "Diálogo Transformativo" que busca primariamente transfor-

mar las relaciones, puede potencialmente poner las bases para una verdadera consulta. Urgimos que el Diálogo Transformativo es un modo distinto de diálogo que abarca una serie de reconocibles preceptos y procesos y por ende puede ser estudiado, sistemáticamente desarrollado dentro de las comunidades locales, y aplicado a los problemas específicos dentro de las mismas comunidades.

<div style="text-align:center">

Introduction: Transformative
Dialogue and its role

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The centrality of consultation to not only Bahá'í epistemology (Smith; Friberg), but to the conception of community that Bahá'ís are trying to learn about (White Kazemipour) can hardly be overstated. Much of the Bahá'í understanding of this practice comes from the writings, and the example, of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who explained:

> Man must consult on all matters, whether major or minor, so that he may become cognizant of what is good. Consultation giveth him insight into things and enableth him to delve into questions which are unknown. The light of truth shineth from the faces of those who engage in consultation. (qtd. in *Consultation* no. 14)

However, consultation, which "must have for its object the investigation of truth," seems to present a demanding set of prerequisites for those involved (*Consultation* no. 21). Not only must these share the goal of truth-seeking, but "[t]he members who

are consulting. . . should behave in the utmost love, harmony and sincerity towards each other" (no. 14).[1] Intention, of course, matters more than perfection, and these attitudes and virtues can be progressively cultivated in a group of people sincerely committed to the consultative process (White Kazemipour). But what is to be done when these preconditions are lacking entirely—when, for instance, the differences in perspective or in desired outcomes are so great between people that they may, at first glance, seem unable or unwilling to even understand each other?

A similar question grows increasingly urgent in discourses in general, both public and private: how can we (re)build the bases of constructive dialogue in a seemingly polarized world? It is hardly controversial to observe that public discourses in particular, buried as they are in a flood of mistrust, misinformation, bias, and prejudice, undermine existing trust relationships and preclude the spontaneous development of new ones. Instead, they often

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[1]   Similarly, the discursive processes of science implicitly require that participants commit to an ethical and empirical search for the truth, reason effectively, exercise intellectual humility (Resnick), develop a guarded trust in the process, and, indirectly, a measure of trust in each other. While we do not discuss science as a discourse at length in this process, we submit that Transformative Dialogue can remove barriers to the capacity of social groups to generate knowledge collectively—in effect, to become, in some measure, scientific communities.

lock people into patterns of belief and behavior that actively bar their participation in anything remotely resembling consultation. These corrosive influences stymie the independent investigation of truth, both individually and collaboratively.

In the North American context within which we are writing, the problems these questions point to seem, at times, overwhelming. We have found, nevertheless, that there are places we can look for answers, or at least the beginnings of answers. Those who take 'Abdu'l-Bahá as an Exemplar can consider the way in which He interacted with those with whom He did not (yet) share the basis for consultation. Howard Colby Ives, who observed 'Abdu'l-Bahá during some of His travels in the United States, describes 'Abdu'l-Bahá's way of listening:

> How differently 'Abdu'l-Bahá met the questioner, the conversationalist, the occasion: To the questioner He responded first with silence—an outward silence. His encouragement always was that the other should speak and He listen. There was never that eager tenseness, that restlessness so often met showing most plainly that the listener has the pat answer ready the moment he should have a chance to utter it. I have heard certain people described as "good listeners," but never had I imagined such a "listener" as 'Abdu'l-Bahá. (193–94)

Ives recounts a story about a Unitarian minister who was interviewing 'Abdu'l-Bahá for an article on the Bahá'í Faith. He describes 'Abdu'l-Bahá as sitting quite silently throughout the interview, listening with unwearied attention to the long hypothetical questions of "the reverend doctor":

> 'Abdu'l-Bahá answered mainly in monosyllables. He never flagged in interest but it seemed to be more an interest in the questioner than in his questions. He sat perfectly relaxed. . . . He looked at the interviewer with that indescribable expression of understanding love which never failed. . . . The doctor talked on and on. I grew more and more impatient. I was ashamed of and for him. Why did not 'Abdu'l-Bahá recognize the superficial nature underlying all these questions? . . . Why was not the interview cut short and the talker dismissed? But if others in the group grew impatient 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not. He encouraged the doctor to express himself fully. If the speaker flagged for a moment 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke briefly in reply to a question and then waited courteously for him to continue. (47–49)

What Ives describes here was not, it seems, consultation *per se*: 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not follow the prescription He sets out for one who consults, to "express . . . with absolute freedom his own opinion and set . . . forth

his argument"—or at least, not yet (*Consultation* no. 9). Before the shared investigation of truth could be undertaken, the relationship between the discussants had to be addressed; thus, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interest was "in the questioner [more] than in his questions" (Ives 47).

What seemed to come so naturally to the Perfect Exemplar of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings may, of course, require no small amount of reflection and practice for those who would follow in His footsteps to cultivate in their own approach to discourse. Complementing the insights to be gleaned from studying 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example, there is a growing body of experience and research, across a range of fields, that can help us uncover the elements of a successful approach to building the kinds of relationships within which consultation can flourish. These elements include the systematic development of skills and processes to bring bias to the surface, promote clarity of thinking, and develop the capacity of trust among potential discourse partners.

In this paper, we examine and consolidate some of this wide-ranging literature, correlating it to principles and insights found in the Bahá'í writings and guidance. We distill a process that we call, for shorthand purposes, Transformative Dialogue (TD).[2]

We take TD to be a special form of dialogue, conducted among two or a very few people, with more time and care than casual conversation, in which the participants, temporarily and in a disciplined manner, forego the ambition of persuading or instructing each other for the sake of listening deeply to gain insight into their dialogue partner's values and ways of knowing. TD is not meant to be a rigid procedure or a set of steps; however, as will become clear in this paper, enough research exists to show that certain attitudes, approaches, and practices are a consistent hallmark of this kind of dialogue.

We will show that the skillsets and practices of TD are based on both scientific research and practical experience, and serve to clear out some of the barriers, not only to consultation within a group, but to the individual's independent investigation of the truth, and to both individual and collective participation in the discourses of society. Even though we view TD as quite distinct from these other processes, we see it as naturally assisting in their initiation, and thereafter playing a supporting role from time to time. TD is dialogue that opens up the possibility of transformation where it was formerly precluded by various social and spiritual disorders. And while TD cannot and should not in any way replace consultation, whose epistemic power it does not aspire to match, we hope that it may be found useful as a preparatory and complementary process. With

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2   Although we cast the term in conscious recollection of Helen Longino's epistemological term "transformative interrogation," sometimes referred to as "transformative criticism," we mean to imply a much broader and more

straightforward reading of the term.

its more humble goal—not the shared investigation of truth, but the establishment of the relational and attitudinal basis for such investigation—TD requires less preparation and discipline than consultation, and can serve to help clear the mental blocks that some might encounter on the road to full and robust participation in that important activity.

A final introductory note: while TD may be of use in establishing a basis for any number of different kinds of conversations, its particular relationship to conversations aimed at making a contribution to discourse is worth accentuating. We do not wish to overstate the problem of polarization, division, and dysfunctional ways of talking to each other. In the context of community-building at the grassroots of our neighborhoods, for instance, it may well be that the natural contact and friendships that develop act as a buffer against the forces of disintegration, and make it more likely than not that conversations will be based on mutual respect and a shared desire to grow in understanding. This may be an area in which it is relatively straightforward to answer the call from the Universal House of Justice for a "rise in the capacity of the individual believer, the local community, and the institutions of the Faith" to, among other things, "engage in conversations on spiritual themes" as we are "focused on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation" (30 December 2021).

At the same time, as the work of community building progresses, it will organically give rise to opportunities to contribute to discourses as well. "[I]n relation to the release of the society-building power of the Faith at the grassroots, [a capacity for contributing to the discourses of society] comes into greater demand as closer association with a population, brought about through the work of expansion and consolidation, leads to increased consciousness of an area's prevailing social problems, as well as of the aspirations of its people to overcome them" (30 December 2021). It may be here, as well as in efforts to contribute to discourses in broader public, professional or academic settings not directly connected to community-building efforts, that elements of dysfunction—polarization, dichotomization, and a tendency to Othering—seep in. If and when this occurs, we believe that TD can serve as a flexible tool that can be conducted in a manner tailored to the (local community) context. As such, we submit (though we do not argue it in detail in this paper) that TD possesses a natural synergy with the Bahá'í community's global project of releasing the society-building power of the Faith. Since TD ultimately aims to transform connections between people in direct conversation with each other, we believe that it can simultaneously set the stage for consultation and the elevation of discourses, and promote relationships that contribute to the revitalization of community life.

Insights into the Depth
of the Problem:
Why Is Discourse So Hard?

As the Bahá'í community focuses on "transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation," it will naturally have to overcome significant barriers to this project. Before exploring how TD may help in this endeavor, then, it will be important to provide an analytical look at those barriers. We focus here on three in particular: the impact of group identity on bias in human reason, the problem of dichotomization, and the limited ability of facts to sway us.

Bias and Group Identity

At the core of the challenge of discourse is the inherent difference in how we understand ourselves and others. In *The Introspection Illusion*, Emily Pronin analyzes a persistent and universal asymmetry between the ways in which we judge our own actions and those of others. We know all the special circumstances and mitigating factors, the nuances of inner dialogue and rationale, when we judge our own actions. But when it comes to judging others, about whom we may know very little, we have no direct access to their inner processes. As a consequence, her research shows, we readily perceive others as biased, and yet are very likely blind to our own biases, even when they are objectively measured and pointed out to us.[3]

Our more charitable view of our own reasoning will often extend to those in a group with which we identify, with the in-group serving as something of an intermediate case between self and other. We tend to use someone's group membership—whether they are part of our in-group or an out-group—as a tentative proxy for a host of beliefs, backed by supporting reasons and justification that are taken as understood.[4]

Becoming aware of biases of this kind is a "critical step in reducing one's prejudice and discrimination" (Perry et al. 64). However, the well-documented fact that many of our biases can be subconscious or unconscious makes it more difficult to cultivate this awareness.[5] One task of TD, then, will be

3   See also Espinosa.

4   The polarization that results from this tendency, once entrenched, can build on itself. Partisans "incorrectly believe that members of the other party dehumanize, dislike, and disagree with them about twice as much as they actually do" ("America's Divided Mind" 10). This erroneous perception can find expression in action, as "[p]eople's actions toward a competitive outgroup can be motivated not only by their perceptions of the outgroup, but also by how they think the outgroup perceives the ingroup (i.e. meta-perceptions)" (Moore-Berg et al. 14864).

5   Kurdi and Banaji, for instance, summarizing a broad range of research into the correlation of conscious (explicit) and unconscious (implicit) attitudes about race, and found that "[i]mplicit measures often reveal higher levels of social group biases than their explicit counterparts, including in participants endorsing egalitarian values" (340).

to reveal the presence of unconscious bias as a near universal aspect of the human condition, in a manner that does not alienate participants.[6]

THE TENDENCY TO DICHOTOMIZE

Most of us have had the experience of trying to engage in a genuine discussion on a certain topic, only to find the conversation drowning in an ever-widening series of concerns, each of which seems to add difficulty rather than clarity. Many discourses, in other words, have come to be embedded in meta-discourses, born of our need to "divide the world into categories in thought and make distinctions within those categories. Though these categories are a natural mechanism to develop meaning, we have a tendency to become almost hypnotized by them" (Isaacs, *Taking Flight* 29). These categories are many, and all too easily develop into false dichotomies: science versus religion, rationalism versus dogma, theist versus

atheist, materialism versus rational spiritualism, one political party versus its opposition, and the like. Indeed, these categories are typically framed by partisans, whose interests are served by dichotomization; the potentially innovative and productive middle ground is precluded by such framing altogether. When discourses are divided along lines of *political* partisanship, they can become particularly intractable.[7]

The tendency to dichotomize and the problem of bias towards out-groups are, of course, intimately connected, given the intertwined relationship between discourses, communities of practice, communities of belief, and personal identity. Dysfunctionalities can become entrenched in a discourse merely because two or more sub-communities form in reaction to each other. When they do so, they devote part of their community's practices and identity-shaping activities to the enumeration of the faults and foibles of the members of the "other" communities of belief. As Powell points out, Othering[8] of

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6   This work does not fall on TD alone, of course. As Espinoza points out, the process of Bahá'í consultation can itself be seen as exerting a debiasing effect . The same could be said of transformative interrogation and the wider truth-seeking context of science. TD, as described below, simply begins this work in a more focused manner, and, importantly, offers ample time and space for the individual to explore the unique roots of their *individual* history and biases in a supportive environment, free from the need to make a collective decision or reach any particular shared understanding.

7   This is even before taking into account deliberate disinformation campaigns—aimed, for instance, at confusing public perception of the authority of science (Oreskes and Conway). Conspiracy narratives crafted to reinforce a dichotomized position rather than convey anything of empirical truth can exert a strongly distorting influence on public discourses, further contributing to polarization and Othering.

8   In this document we will follow the example of Powell and Menendian in capitalizing 'Othering' to help identify it as a distinct process at play within our world

this kind goes beyond an individual's reactive judgment of someone different from themselves:

> Othering is not about liking or disliking someone. It is based on the conscious or unconscious assumption that a certain identified group poses a threat to the favoured group. It is largely driven by politicians and the media, as opposed to personal contact. Overwhelmingly, people don't "know" those that they are Othering. (n.p.)

Othering can take quite extreme forms and be pervasive in its effects. Racism, for instance, carries so many entanglements (cultural, economic, geographic, and so on) that it should be considered a disease of the worldview. Amongst the kinds of bias TD must strive to uncover, those contributing to Othering are perhaps the most crucial.

Why Are Facts and Reason Not Enough?

For those who might hope that human reason, when exposed to "the facts," will naturally see through simplistic dichotomies and reject the biases just described, Journalist Will Storr provides a sobering assessment:

> As you can see, reason has zero effect on [some] people [in some contexts]. What I want to know is, why? Humans are rational

beings. . . . But intelligence apparently isn't the forcefield against wrongness that I had once assumed. Reason is no magic bullet. (26–27)

The phenomenon of cognitive dissonance, first described under that name by Leon Festinger in 1957, can explain some of the psychology behind those cases where facts or reasoned argument do not change people's minds. Research has, in fact, confirmed that positions sometimes harden in the face of facts that run counter to one's beliefs. This is a characteristic of science denialism, for instance, as discussed in Schmid and Betsch's meta-analysis of studies related to the question of the effect of arguing the facts in public. Using the terms put forward by Diethelm and McKee, Schmid and Betsch carefully distinguish "science denialism" from "scepticism":

> [In] contrast to functional scepticism, science deniers accept evidence only if it confirms their prior beliefs—that usually contradict the scientific consensus. This dysfunctional scepticism is driven by how the denier would like things to be rather than what he has evidence for, making science denialism a motivated rejection of science. (931)

The implication here is that arguing with a science denier (for instance) will simply drive them deeper into denial.[9]

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and within the dynamics of discourses.

9   This may be exacerbated in the

Argumentation, then, is not a promising methodology for TD.

Our Path to Transformative Dialogue, and Some Initial Considerations

Our own path to TD began with our personal experiences while trying to bridge divides we encountered in a wide-ranging variety of dysfunctional public discourses addressing topics where truth and facts *should* matter but are often lost in rhetorical squabbling. This included informal apologetic debates between ourselves (as theists) and others who could be characterized as atheists, materialists, and/or self-styled 'skeptics' who attacked religion as they conceived of or experienced it. One of us (Neyman) also studied the longstanding argumentation between advocates of creationism (in

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context of a *public* argument: public debaters have a stake in not 'losing' by conceding that they have misconstrued the facts. Schmid and Betsch's meta-analysis concludes that it is still important to argue in public for the sake of the audience: "[Not] responding to science deniers has a negative effect on attitudes towards behaviours favoured by science (for example, vaccination) and intentions to perform these behaviours," whereas "[p]roviding the facts about the topic or uncovering the rhetorical techniques typical for denialism had positive effects" (Schmid and Betsch 931). TD, being conducted in private and in a non-argumentative mode, between two or a few people, is not faced with this division of motivation.

many forms) and exponents of the science of biological evolution, some of whom went well beyond the science to advocate scientism and other materialistic philosophies. Other discourses in which we engaged at various times were characterized by the defense of science and science-based public policy in the face of a host of tendencies ranging from ignorance and wishful thinking to structured campaigns of disinformation. Discourses in this category include, most prominently, those pertaining to pandemic response, vaccine hesitation, and climate change science and mitigation, as well as the phenomenon of flat-earthism as it has propagated on the internet. Because our efforts were always rooted in a deep appreciation of the intrinsic harmony of science and religion, a core Bahá'í teaching, as a reliable guide to the truth, we often found ourselves required to simultaneously defend science while attempting to call out and discourage scientism (Ridder et al.).

On every side and in many ways, public dialogue and discourse increasingly seemed to us to be intractably dysfunctional. Perhaps worst of all, we came to recognize that we, ourselves, were not immune from these discursive disorders, as we sometimes discovered after the fact that we had fallen into othering behavior, labeling, and badgering with facts in an attempt to persuade. We often proceeded without a plan for recognizing our own biases or building constructive dialogue.

Thus we began a search for insights, knowledge, and processes that might

serve to heal and elevate discourses. Certain questions came to dominate our thinking. Why should the process of discussion be so hard and fraught with pitfalls? Shouldn't common sense epistemology preclude endless argumentation about basic facts? How do intelligent people seemingly become so blind to their own biases? We found answers to some of these questions about the causes of dysfunction in the research cited earlier on the introspection illusion, group identity, dichotomization, and cognitive biases. But with the scope of the problem clarified, the crucial, practical questions remained: What questions, approaches, and attitudes, based on what theories and theoretical frameworks, have been shown to be effective in producing actual progress in dialogue and discourse? What characterizes a fruitful conversation? How do we know if we're creating or sustaining the type of dialogue that contributes well to the discourses of society? Which skills can be systematically learned and refined at the community level? What is the role of the community in supporting these efforts?

Grounded in the need for pragmatic insights and techniques, we continued our search in the form of a broad survey of published research ranging over several disciplinary and theoretical traditions, primarily sociology, philosophy, psychiatry, behavioral sciences, and developmental studies. We also drew on authors and journalists, who were practitioners themselves, and often the source of valuable leads

to more detailed studies and research. We highlighted attempts to facilitate conversations that have achieved some level of pragmatic success in mending public discourses. Throughout, we took into consideration the writings of the Bahá'í Faith, and especially searched for resources that would touch on principles, practices, and goals central to the Bahá'í Faith. We found ourselves, in effect, almost burdened with an embarrassment of riches. The very flood of available literature stands as evidence that the problems confronting discourse are widely perceived and very concerning to many people. Individuals and communities are engaged in a search for insight and solutions, and there is widespread acknowledgement that no one has all the answers.

The literature exploring the problems afflicting discourse, which has been briefly reviewed in this paper, provides some initial clues about what effective TD will look like.

First, given the insidious nature of Othering, which can take on structural and un-proclaimed forms, practitioners of TD must be alert to the need to bring such elements to the surface by identifying them. As Isaacs states, dialogue is an avenue for us to step "back from the way of thinking produced by fragmentation and incorporat[e] another way of thinking. Dialogue is an attempt to perceive the world with new eyes, not merely to solve problems using the thought that created them in the first instance" (Isaacs, *Taking Flight* 30).

Second, the question of whether and when to argue the data requires

careful attention in the conduct of discourse, and will depend on the ground rules and basis of trust underlying the discussion. There are certainly contexts where disciplined argumentation is productive—in a process like Longino's transformative interrogation or in ongoing consultation as part of an iterative process of learning and application, for instance. What is crucial in these contexts is the existence of a trusting relationship. Where such a relationship does not exist, argumentation is unlikely to be productive. Such conditions indicate one of the primary use cases for TD. Thus, one descriptive characteristic of TD, particularly when it arises as part of an effort to heal dysfunctional discourses, is that it is a radical turning away from, or suspension of, debate and argumentation. It is an important way of going "beyond the culture of contest" (Karlberg, *Beyond*).

In arguing that TD requires its proponents to move away from the focused attempt to persuade, we are not *at all* advocating that they should suppress or disguise their inclinations, values, and beliefs. Far from it. To do so would be highly counter-productive, a form of dissimulation almost certain to breed suspicion. Nor should a participant in TD enter the process with all of their most fundamental beliefs held in suspension. A Bahá'í for instance, would not be open to the possibility that—contrary to Bahá'í belief—God does not exist, or that men and women are not equal. We are instead suggesting that participants should prioritize the more urgent quest for mutual

understanding over any attempts to persuade, or even inform. This quest for deep understanding requires transparency as to how people arrive at their assumptions and opinions, provided dialogue has matured enough for such norms to be introduced and adopted. It involves the discovery or creation of shared values. It has the capacity to transform relationships among the dialogue participants at successively deeper and more powerful levels.

A useful illustration of this point can be found in the work of Katharine Hayhoe, a practicing climate scientist who has additionally taken on the role of public educator and advocate. She describes how she learned to subordinate presenting facts to focusing on working "to bring people together." Bombarding people with facts, data, and science "only engages their defenses, pushes them into self-justification, and leaves us more divided than when we began" (*Saving Us* xi–xii). She makes a point of emphasizing that the single most important thing that anyone can do is to bring people together by talking. By deliberately starting a conversation with something that unites instead of dividing us, we are starting at a place of mutual respect, agreement, and understanding. And as we truly listen, we are likely to discover more surprising points of agreement (xii).[10]

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10   It is noteworthy that Hayhoe falls short of her own ideal, illustrating how subtle and pervasive such processes remain in spite of a conscientious effort. Applying the scientific label "Dismissives"

Third, awareness of the pervasiveness of cognitive bias requires that TD be approached with an attitude of intellectual humility. Journalist, author, and podcaster David McRaney, who has devoted his creative and research energies to understanding how humans succumb to cognitive bias, makes two critical observations about this virtue. On the one hand, he argues that the power to persuade a person ultimately rests with them, not with you, I, or anyone else:

> You can't persuade another person to change their mind if that person doesn't want to do so. . . . [I]n many ways, persuasion is mostly encouraging people to realize change is possible. All persuasion is self-persuasion. (xvii)

On the other hand, he emphasizes that entering into truly transformative dialogue implies that we are in a state of mind in which we may also have our own thinking changed. Acknowledging, along with Storr (8), that at least one or a few of our ideas are wrong or in need of improvement is an essential starting point for any true dialogue. Both common experience and research such as described in Kruger and Dunning suggests that we often think we know more about a subject or the thoughts and feelings of another person then we actually do, and that such misplaced confidence

can have disastrous consequences. Perhaps the most damaging effect of overconfidence on dialogue is that it makes us certain that we are correct and uninterested in what other people think: "Certainty is a curiosity killer" (Marti, qtd. in Pappas).

Successful TD depends, therefore, on a conscious cultivation of intellectual humility—a quality that Bahá'ís, mindful of the guidance of the Universal House of Justice on the importance of "a humble attitude of learning," strive to embody in all they do (Universal House of Justice, Letter dated 28 Dec. 2010). In keeping with this principle, TD is structured to ensure that those involved have an opportunity to discover their own biases and the basis for their beliefs, and can act as assistants to each other in this process. As such, TD is not only about discovering what other people think; it is also a process of self-discovery. Significant time is therefore directed towards the reflection of understandings, clarification of terms, identification of values and feelings, and ensuring that such understandings are expressed clearly, and that the speaker has truly been understood.

Intellectual humility, again, does not require us to hold all of our beliefs as uncertain and negotiable. Yet we can have an ironclad conviction in certain truths while readily accepting that our understanding of these core beliefs is provisional, impartial, and open to improvement.[11] It is also foundational for

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to seven percent of the US population, she herself dismisses this part of her potential audience as unreachable.

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11   Indeed, this is arguably the precise attitude that Bahá'ís attempt to cultivate as

all true dialog, and, in particular, for participation in scientific discourses. In this spirit, participants in TD will tend to use open and provisional language rather than speaking in terms that are final and absolute, promoting refinement of understandings and conclusions. Participants additionally practice intellectual humility and receptivity to opposing views by avoiding the language of "us and them," being sensitive to the impact of labeling (particularly in non-science contexts), and scrupulously maintaining vigilance against the pernicious effects of Othering. The overall attitude is one of non-judgmental acceptance—if not of every idea another participant shares, of the fact that the person currently holds them—where each participant shows the others respect and uses language that conveys genuine care and concern.

The experiences of Lee McIntyre, a philosopher and historian of science, neatly encapsulate these foundational elements of Transformative Dialogue—avoiding (and challenging) Othering, resisting the temptation to argue, and practicing intellectual humility. In his book *How to Talk to a Science Denier*, McIntyre describes his initial goal: engaging science deniers in order to bring them to the point of changing their minds. However, in the process of pursuing this object, he underwent a profound change in perspective. In the book's epilogue he reflects on the lessons he learned about not Othering people on the basis of belief:

To embrace the idea that someone who disagrees with us is still worth talking to is to make an investment in our fellow human beings and in our future together. While we are trying to get science deniers to enlarge their circle of concern, we must enlarge our own circle to include them. (185)

This same sentiment must characterize all TD. But to build from this sentiment, and these foundational ideas, to a practice of TD requires further examination of the varied literature on approaches that broadly meet its requirements.

ATTITUDES, STRATEGIES, PRINCIPLES, AND SKILLS FOR TD AND THE ELEVATION OF DISCOURSES

With a picture emerging of the kinds of attitudes that will lead to effective, rather than divisive dialogue, the question becomes: how can these attitudes find expression in concrete practices? In this section we draw on research examining specific practices, strategies and skills to assist with healing dysfunctional argumentation, or mending relationships between people with opposing views.

WHO DO WE SPEAK TO?

It may go without saying, but TD is often needed most in situations where people habitually avoid conversations out of complacency with the status

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part of being in a learning mode (see Smith).

quo, or out of fear of conflict. It behooves those interested in moving past discursive dysfunctionality, towards understanding and unity, to seek out difficult conversations.

In her book, *I Never Thought of It That Way*, journalist Mónica Guzmán suggests observing and treasuring your "I Never Thought of It That Way" moments, and advises us, if we do not have such moments, to seek them out. Rather than fleeing from difficult conversations or the possibility of conflict, we should welcome them as opportunities to "put our curiosity to work," to help fill in gaps in what we know, and to collect knowledge that will inspire different questions (74). First, we must find some friction by putting ourselves in spaces where we can interact with people from outside of our comfortable belief silos. In those environments it is possible to explore the differences between two perspectives, and then, as Guzmán states, "get curious" (61). Curiosity, or the quest for understanding, involves enlarging our circle of concern to discover our gaps in knowledge, what each person's values mean to them and what that implies about our world. It requires absorbing interest, and deep listening as to how people arrive at their assumptions and opinions.

If the prospect of seeking out people who we disagree with in order to "get curious" sounds daunting, then we can find reassurance in the robust research confirming that when we enter such encounters with a genuine intent to see the "other" as a friend, genuine relationship is in fact possible. We should also call to mind the guidance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who counsels us: "See ye no strangers; rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness" (*Selections* 8:7).

Psychologist Gordon W. Allport's contact hypotheses, developed over sixty years ago, suggests that people from different groups must make true contact and engage with each other in positive social interactions—in short, cultivate friendship—to help eliminate inter-group prejudice (261–84). A review of fifty years of research on Allport's contact hypothesis concluded that it "no longer merits the modest title of 'hypothesis', but fully deserves acknowledgement as an integrated and influential theory" (Hewstone and Swart 374). Their metanalysis showed that contact with those in an out-group is specifically associated with increased trust, reduced threat response, and increased practice of forgiveness (Pettigrew and Tropp, qtd. in Hewstone and Swart 376). Remarkably, it has been shown that extended contact—in which one's friends or other members of one's in-group associate with members of an out-group—and even *imagined* contact—in which one merely goes through a process of visualizing an interaction with a member of the out-group — can have a similar impact, if somewhat reduced (Turner and Crisp 129–131).

How Do We Converse?
Deeper Conversations: Intimate Sharing and Active Listening

TD will thus often occur between people who begin from a place of disagreement or difference. Crucially, the foundational attitude for anyone embarking on TD is to renounce any objective to persuade the other participant(s) of anything. This is not to say that minds cannot change; indeed, the evidence suggests that TD can powerfully set the stage for such change. Yet, just as in consultation, the goal is not to advance *one's own* agenda. Further, unlike in consultation, one cannot assume that the other participant(s) share the goal of transformation; indeed, as many of the examples at the end of this paper highlight, it is possible for one person to infuse a conversation with the spirit of TD even when other participants begin with an antagonistic attitude.

If the motive is not to persuade, then what is the goal? In a nutshell, it is to discover more about the other participant(s) and their views, as well as our own. Here we can look to the insights of Bohmian dialogue.[12] Dean Rickles, in the Foreword to Bohm's *On Dialogue*, explains that Bohm's approach sprang from his understanding of the need to uncover and question assumptions and biases to facilitate understanding:

> The key then is to expose the contingency in where thoughts and beliefs come from. . . .
>
> A large part of the motivation for Bohm's approach to dialogue comes from this "genealogy" of assumptions and opinions. The simple fact is that a large proportion of these assumptions and opinions that one reacts so strongly to . . . [have been] handed down by teachers, parents, TV, books, and suchlike. (xiv–xv)

We would extend this broad aim of uncovering the "genealogy" of assumptions and opinions to also include feelings and spiritual values. The resulting spirit of inquiry changes a discussion into what Bohm characterizes as true *communication*. As Bohm himself puts it:

> In a dialogue, however, nobody is trying to win. Everybody wins if anybody wins. There is a different sort of spirit to it. In dialogue, there is no attempt to gain points, or to make your particular view

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12   Although David Bohm is perhaps best known as a theoretical physicist, his posthumously published work *On Dialogue* attempts to apply his philosophical principles to improve humankind's prospects. What has come to be known as "Bohmian dialogue" has "aroused a fair amount [of] interest among organization theorists . . . and some universities" (Pylkkänen 198). A range of researchers and practitioners have explicitly drawn and expanded on Bohmian dialogue; these include William N. Isaacs, director of the Dialogue Project at MIT's Organizational Learning Center, and Patricia Romney, Leadership Coach and Difficult Dialogues Facilitator.

prevail. Rather, whenever any mistake is discovered on the part of anybody, everybody gains. . . . a dialogue is something more of a common participation in which we are not playing a game against each other, but with each other. In a dialogue, everybody wins. (7)

Where Bohm was primarily focused on the possible epistemic outcomes of this form of dialogue, TD emphasizes the complementary impact on the relationships and understanding among participants, and defers epistemic judgement. By suspending the motive to persuade and the constraints of a particular contentious topic, TD opens the door to a deeper connection, and can make it safe for participants to share much more openly. TD's transformative potential transcends particular issues; it is grounded in the deepest aspects of what makes us all human, which can emerge more readily in an atmosphere of *open, intimate sharing*.

Indeed, the creation of intimate sharing within a relationship can have such a profound impact that it may well become a central goal of, and a motivator for, TD in its own right. This is the spiritual basis on which the success of TD depends. It will likely help the TD process take on a life of its own, leading naturally to cycles of refinement composed of study, consultation, action and reflection.

To illustrate the transformative potential of deep conversation characterized by intimate sharing, we can consider a familiar component of

Bahá'í culture: the fireside chat, which Shoghi Effendi describes as "the most powerful and effective teaching medium that has been found so far" (qtd. in *Teaching* 31).[13] Its power does not rest on the persuasiveness of a speaker, but on its atmosphere, which encourages open sharing by all. The fireside is, ideally, a "personal" and "informal" gathering conducted in the home" (29), where "intimate personal questions can be answered" (31).[14]

Of course, in contrast with the aims of TD, which are restricted to hearing and understanding beliefs and associated values, the aims of a fireside chat are likely to include the discussion of the teachings or other aspects of the Bahá'í Faith. It should also be clear, however, that because firesides are meant to engage "intimate personal questions" the fireside, as envisioned by Shoghi Effendi, is (at least sometimes) a much more intimate affair than mere fact sharing; it invites people to share their stories, even aspects of their lives involving struggle and distress. In such a setting, rather than remaining on an intellectual footing, the conversation is more likely to engage topics where the healing power of the Faith is most needed, and so also more likely to provide scope for the generative power of

13   See also Hiebert for a useful discussion of these points.

14   In the authors' experiences, many so-called "firesides" in North American communities are more accurately public talks that just happen to be given in a home. Such a venue has much less scope for this type of intimate encounter.

deep listening which we discuss next.

The intimacy and openness TD call for speak to the importance of setting. TD requires a private space, free from distracting interruptions. Depending on what is being discussed and what is shared, bearing in mind that TD may touch on sensitive topics, it may be helpful to give prior thought to making available resources supporting referral to skilled social and psychological support services.[15]

While the relationship of intimate sharing is the spiritual core of TD, its corollary, the practice of genuine *listening*, is perhaps the most important *skill* required for the performance of TD. One of the motivations for TD is the expectation that the participants, through a process of deep listening and reflection, may eventually find common ground and goals, perhaps in unexpected ways. By this means, differences of belief, that have given rise to contention and estrangement, or may have the potential to do so,

are dissipated or transformed and absorbed into wider perspectives. At the very least, participants come away with a better understanding of each other's views, and a reduction in the tendency to frame those views too narrowly for rhetorical and psychological advantage.

The kind of listening required to understand a *person* goes beyond that which we use to attend to an *argument*. Psychologist Carl Rogers' hypothesis, developed over fifty years ago, posits that "the individual has within him or herself vast resources for self-understanding, for altering their own self-concept, basic attitudes, and his or her self-directed behavior" (Rogers 1). But these resources require activation, and it is dialogue, prompted by focused listening, that facilitates a deeper understanding of selves. It is through the processes of listening and reflection that attitudes and perspectives are transformed; but of primary interest for TD is listening's role in developing a trusting relationship between participants. Developing an attitude of sincere interest in a speaker is not an easy task. It requires us to be willing to risk seeing the world from the speaker's point of view. If we have a number of such experiences, they will shape an attitude that will allow us to be truly genuine in our interest in the speaker— and potentially broaden our minds to a multifaceted outlook about the topic.

The kind of listening required here is well described by the concept of "active listening," which is discussed and applied in a variety of

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15   Other resources can be provided to support the growth of the newly awakened potentialities that are the desired outcome of TD. This includes such things as the tools and training for independent investigation of the truth and moving into social action. However much the principles of TD can be applied by a single individual, it is the need for this supportive environment, coupled with the consultative benefit of collective reflection on what issues and types of discussion work best in the local community, that convince us that TD is best when developed and supported in a community environment

contexts—psychology, counselling, life- and business coaching, mediation, and many more. Through active listening, we show unconditional regard for the speaker and affirm their experience, thereby creating rapport and building empathy and trust. Active listening is rare enough that it makes an impression when we experience it. As Minson et al. state:

> Most of us can readily recall a specific instance when a discussion partner with an opposing viewpoint listened to our arguments thoughtfully, seemingly considering the proffered information, and asked follow-up questions suggesting genuine curiosity and a desire to understand. Such experiences are memorable in part because they are rare. (5)

So, how do we listen actively? One group of social and behavioral scientists suggests that active listening is a trainable skill and that even brief training increases the use of active listening during conflictual interactions (Weger Jr. et al.). These researchers note that "nonverbal elements of active listening communicate care and concern more powerfully than specific verbal behaviors such as paraphrasing, questioning, giving advice, or reflecting emotional content of messages" (38). The indices of active listening can thus include, first, nonverbal elements of communication—showing acknowledgment of the speaker, for instance, through cues such as smiling, nodding in agreement,

a concerned facial expression, and eye contact—and second, verbal acknowledgment.[16] While paraphrasing—restating in the listener's own words what the listener thinks the speaker is trying to say—is helpful to convey deep listening, Weger Jr. et al.'s data analysis indicates that this practice is not as important as a simple acknowledgement in response to what was just heard. However, as Minson et al. point out, actively expressing interest by any of these interactive means is more powerful than a general expression of interest at the outset. (852)

These same researchers also emphasize that a most effective component of active listening is asking questions to encourage the speaker to elaborate on his or her beliefs or feelings. Questions—especially follow-up questions like asking the speaker to elaborate on something just said—signal conversational receptiveness and generate rapport. It expresses the

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16   Because dialogue tends to be influenced by non-verbal cues, face to face dialogue is, far and away, the best context for an authentic TD process. When two people share a common space, they can be attuned to each other in subliminal ways (Scott). Attempting to conduct TD in an online space, then, may be successful to some degree, but only in those contexts where personal experiences can be shared, personal growth fostered, and relationships encouraged. Even when conducted with care, such virtual dialogues miss the enriching follow-up afforded by less formal conversations in other shared social contexts.

"willingness to thoughtfully engage with opposing views" (Yeomans et al. 131). People who ask follow-up questions are perceived to be more trustworthy, reasonable, and objective, and are more likely to have future positive encounters with their interlocutors. Questions convey interest, and when people view someone as being interested in them, they behave more open-mindedly, and develop more favorable attitudes toward the opposing viewpoint and those who hold it. Asking one's conversational partner to elaborate on their point, rather than counterarguing or simply restating one's own views, can also help the partner process opposing ideas more objectively.[17] Behaving open-mindedly

in general may make the other person perceive *themselves* as being more open-minded, therefore contributing to a more successful interaction (Chen et al.).[18]

Complementary to active listening, at the level of content, four simple conversation strategies have been found to lead to significantly higher levels of receptivity to a speaker's ideas, especially those with opposing views. These strategies make future collaboration more likely. These strategies are, first, to find any existing points of agreement; second, to employ hedging language—such as "somewhat," "might," "appear to be"—to soften conflicting claims; third, to explicitly acknowledge that one is committed to practicing genuine listening skills; and fourth, to re-frame the conversation in the most positive terms available. People who use these four strategies are more likely to have future positive encounters because, this research suggests, when people view someone as being interested they become hopeful that their viewpoint will be evaluated fairly and are more likely to participate

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17   In addition to conveying interest and promoting collective learning, questions may be crucial for clarifying implicit assumptions. Different people may be using the same word in distinct ways, each assuming that the others share their meaning, leading to fundamental misunderstandings (Marti et al. "Certainty"). This diversity of meaning can lead to problems even in highly disciplined fields of science (Keller and Lloyd). This should be a strong motivator for us to incorporate curiosity into our dialogue practices and ask questions to clarify what is intended. Similarly, perceptions, particularly in ambiguous circumstances, often depend on unconscious factors which in turn are based on prior experience, leading us to "argue over subjective truth that feels like raw, unfiltered, unassailable truth" to each of us privately (McRaney 80ff, discussing the work of Pascal Wallisch). While these epistemic challenges ultimately point to

the importance of consultative epistemology, as described by Karlberg and Smith, incorporating curiosity and questions about intended meanings and subjective perceptions is a relatively simple feature of TD that can address these concerns in part.

18   Indeed, research suggests that people tend to mimic each other's language and conversational style generally, such that the level of conversational receptiveness exhibited by one person affects the behavior of their counterpart (Yeomans et al.).

in further dialogue. They also claim that these strategies help to reduce negative stereotypes, resentment, and mistrust (Yeomans et al.).

Underlying these specific "techniques" of active listening must be a sincere intention. Philosopher and business team coach Otto Scharmer describes four levels of listening, each of which expresses a different intention. He urges the listener to move from listening for an opportunity to interrupt and respond, to actually listening to what is being said — even if it presents information disconfirming of our expectations and hopes, to a listening that sincerely attempts to understand the other's perspective, feelings and motivations, and finally to what he calls "generative listening." In this last stage, the listener finds himself "holding a space for something new to be born." By this shift in perspective, listening becomes an opportunity to empower both parties to explore commonalities, in a shared attitude of search suffused with a willingness to transform their perspectives and beliefs and generate new ideas to help shape a better future (Scharmer 47–48).

From Structure to Spontaneity

So far, then, we have described TD as involving conversations between people with different viewpoints, possibly on contentious topics, characterized by intimate sharing and active listening, which can be supported by specific skills, techniques, and intentions. To create a space capable of sustaining such conversations, is it enough to bring people together in a private, distraction-free space? Or is further structure required?

There is a number of groups and research labs—including Braver Angels, Essential Partners,[19] The Difficult Conversations Lab, and Living Room Conversations, that use structured dialogue approaches to connect people across divides fostered within our dysfunctional public discourses.[20] These structured dialogue approaches embody core aspects of TD, by fostering in participants the capacity to establish rapport, be curious, practice active or deep listening, seek common ground, and leave each session on a positive note. The structure provided in these approaches typically includes the use of a prepared format to guide a time-limited dialogue in which people (hopefully) come to a deeper appreciation of each other's perspectives. However, perhaps the most structured component of these approaches is that they typically begin with short educational workshops or courses to build participants' skills and understanding. During this guided process, participants practice by interacting with people with opposing views, but with an

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19   Formerly known as The Public Conversations Project

20   One such structured dialogue, developed by Ryan Nakade under the auspices of the Oregon Mediation Society, actually bears the name "Transformative Dialogue" (not to be confused with our broader use of the term). The specifics of his approach can be found on his blog (Nakade).

explicit focus on skill-building. They learn greeting behaviors, what types of questions to ask, how to convey genuine listening, and how to clarify terms, show respect, suspend judgment, hold back the urge to criticize or persuade, and show appreciation for each other's contributions and the opportunity to learn from one another. The burgeoning membership of these groups is indicative of their growing popularity.

TD, as we envision it, aspires to an openness and spontaneity that allow it to be entered into whenever the need and opportunity present themselves, and without the need to depend on an elaborate structure.[21] However, jumping right in to the process of TD, particularly with people we have not yet formed strong friendships with, may not be possible: the instinct to avoid difficult conversations may first need to be relaxed. A structured, time-limited, and highly constrained dialogue process may be an easier first step, with its constraints providing reassurance that the dialogue will be kept within certain bounds. Where structured dialogues such as those mentioned, or similar ones prepared for local context, are available, they may serve an important function in initiating the process of TD and training a cohort to collaborate at the local level.

Another aspect of structure involves the size and composition of the group itself. Bohm, for example, as well as Isaacs and Romney who incorporate his ideas into their practice, are all concerned with dialogue at the group, organizational, and/or community level, with all the intra- and inter-group dynamics that involves (Isaacs "Process and Potential"; Romney). Bohm, in particular, observes that "a group of about twenty to forty is almost a microcosm of the whole society," and that "a group that is too small doesn't work very well." People in small groups, Bohm says, tend to fall into patterns of being "polite to each other and avoid the issues that may cause trouble." In larger groups "something different begins to happen. . . . the question of . . . collectively shared meaning . . . begins to come in." Bohm acknowledges that this is a very powerful force: "The collective thought is more powerful than the individual thought" (14–15).

Although he doesn't explicitly say so, it seems that Bohm aims to have a sufficient group size so that a variety of viewpoints and cultural backgrounds can come up, give rise to a measured amount of stress and friction, and thus serve as occasion for discovering the motivations, values, and assumptions behind beliefs, and give ample opportunity for bringing forward difficult topics as a learning opportunity.

In contrast, TD specifically and purposefully invites two, or at most a few, people to draw apart from these wider discourses, in part to temporarily diminish the inhibiting influence that group dynamics may have on the individual's journey of self-discovery of their own assumptions and motivations. The

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21   As we describe elsewhere, this spontaneity, of course, may be tempered by proper consideration of participants' privacy and security.

difference between Bohmian dialogue and TD is best understood by considering that Bohmian dialogues are intended to train people in the art of dialogue per se, as well as (potentially) to advance shared understanding on important issues with a view to (eventually) making substantive progress on those issues. As such, Bohmian dialogue also has overlap with consultation, in that there is a definite emphasis on the nature of an epistemic process that can advance understanding. Conversely, we envision TD as being motivated by the crises and pain in participants' lives that stem from the already entrenched dysfunctionalities of extant public discourses. These are questions of degree more than absolute differences, but TD prioritizes intimacy over structure, and relationship-building over epistemic goals.

When and if it makes sense to strongly structure TD, or a TD-like process, will of course be contextual, and incorporating structuring elements is not an all or nothing game. An example of an element of structure that might be included in a relatively informal TD at the initiative of a participant emerges from The Difficult Conversations Lab at Columbia University, where researchers "intentionally generate the kind of discomfort that most people spend all of Thanksgiving trying to avoid" (Peter T. Coleman, qtd. in Ripley). The Lab's research demonstrates that offering a spectrum of opinions *before a discussion* can prime participants to ask more questions, propose higher quality ideas, be more willing to continue the conversation, and ultimately leave the lab more satisfied with their conversations (Ripley). We have observed that many practitioners attempt to overcome social polarization using this strategy.

A BROADER CONCEPTION
OF REASON: STORYTELLING,
THE ARTS, AND IMAGINATION

It should be clear from both the research on the surprisingly frequent inefficacy of facts in changing minds, and the description of the role of intimate sharing and active listening, that TD is not a *collective* exercise in applying clinical, detached reason, however much it may often require *individual* reasoning to practice active listening. Indeed, the conception of reason as an abstract, objective, value-neutral power is an outmoded one of little use to real life. The mind, viewed in its broad sense as "the power of the human spirit" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 55:6), operates not through analytical logic alone; it fluidly integrates such logic with aesthetic appreciation, emotional understanding, intuition, and imagination. TD, then, must reflect the truth that, as one scholar of the role of the arts in civic dialogue puts it, "[d]ialogue is focused conversation . . . which engages the heart as well as the mind" (Romney 2).

Jonathan Gottschall describes humankind as "The Storytelling Animal": "*Homo fictus* (fiction man), the great ape with the storytelling mind" (60). The epigraph of this book quotes the

novelist Elie Wiesel: "God made Man because He loves stories" (34). With their unrivalled power to capture the imagination and bring people together, stories have an important part to play in fostering meaningful dialogue.

This centrality of storytelling to TD is already implicit in the role of intimate sharing discussed above. In sharing experiences—telling one's story—a speaker does more than simply assert a set of facts. Storytelling exposes the roots of belief; and in telling one's story the listener is invited to go beyond understanding whatever facts are being asserted, to appreciating values, motivations, and *how* the speaker came to hold their views. Thus, the mere act of telling one's own story, or of hearing another's, is an opportunity to be transformed.

The value of storytelling in fostering dialogue is attested by many practitioners and researchers in the field. Mónica Guzmán shares examples of how curiosity, listening and the sharing of experiences help build new, or mend broken, relationships. She states that we draw closer to a deeper understanding of each other by sharing the "paths people have walked to, where they are, and the things they've seen and done along the way." She argues well in her book that evidence shows that people on either side of the divide "respect moral beliefs more when they are supported by personal experiences, not facts" (Guzmán 160).

Storytelling—in the sense used so far of telling one's own story—emerges naturally in dialogue once a level of trust is established. There is a kind of art to telling one's own story; thus, storytelling can serve as an entry point for bringing the arts into TD. Indeed, our interactions with art can unlock possibilities for transformation.

When engaging in the process of TD, participants must be open to the experiences, ideas, and perspectives of others. What better way to explore the issues or roots of one's beliefs than through the arts, with their capacity to accommodate ambiguity and multiple perspectives, and to help us suspend logical (or moral) judgment in favor of considering what art might be trying to say on its own terms? In art, all of us have a role to play. Romney, drawing on Bohm's concept that each speaker in a true dialogue brings a part of the story, argues that art specifically can help us reach for multipartiality, the ability to see all sides and all parts of the whole. An art-infused space can support respectful conversations about differences, that can take "people both inward to self-reflection and outward to an exploration of the experiences and attitudes of their neighbors" (Romney 15).

Thus, we can ask ourselves how to use art and creativity to build an environment where participants are given an opportunity to embrace complexity, where nuances, contradiction and ambiguity are offered as a way of priming participants to be open to multifaceted perspectives. Whether in a structured or a spontaneous way, devoting time in TD to share and reflect on art can support participants' reflection, listening

and learning, and help them open their minds, without the immediate obligation to take a side or voice an opinion.

Ultimately, the incorporation of storytelling and the arts, and an openness to drawing on the powers of imagination, reflects the holism with which TD views its participants. Here again we find some resonance with Bohm, whose approach to dialogue was motivated by the desire to unlock "a more holistic operation of the mind, leading to more orderly action within the whole," reflective of Bohm's holistic view of reality itself (Pyelkkänen 45). TD, to be sure, for all that it remains a relatively modest and pragmatic process, is also conceived within a holistic metaphysical framework, albeit perhaps not as tightly integrated intellectually as Bohm's. In our conception of TD, inspired by our engagement with the Bahá'í Revelation, the holism of the human mind is itself integrated into the holism of the human species: a shared belief in the oneness of humankind as a metaphysical reality can empower the discovery of shared values which can heal dysfunctional discourses. We deem this insight but one aspect of a spiritual view of humankind, as illumined by Revelation (Lample).

Where storytelling allows each participant to contribute, and incorporation of the arts can provide a collective point of focused reflection, the human power of creativity and imagination can also be harnessed in TD to generate a collective understanding. We re-iterate that TD is primarily about transforming relationships; where this is achieved in some measure, TD is successful even if no rapprochement on questions of substance occurs, and the even further aim of generating shared understanding may often require the greater epistemic power of true consultation. However, as Otto Scharmer's "fourth level" listening highlights, listening can become an act of being "open to the future" (48) to expand the idea and practice of dialogue in the direction of collaborative construction of new realities and alternative points of view. Other authors suggest that we create "imaginary moments," in which participants join in developing new visions of a reality. These imaginary moments, they suggest, "sow the seeds for co-construction, but also shift the position of the participants from combative to cooperative" (Gergen et al. 13). They argue that antagonists may temporarily suspend their differences by imagining a reality they both can work towards. When the conversation becomes generative, the authors suggest, it redefines the participants' conceptions of each other, and lays the groundwork for a conception of "us."

Models of Transformative Dialogue

We conclude this paper by surveying a few models that may illuminate the process of TD. These examples show that processes akin to TD can occur through casual conversations or in the context of a structured project, and may result in outcomes ranging from the "mere" establishment of an openness

to relationship and sharing that was not previously there, to profound change in participants' understandings and perspectives. We hope that these descriptions give life to the features of TD discussed above and provide inspiring confirmation that dialogue can in fact be transformative.

Deep Canvassing
and Street Epistemology

We begin with two relatively structured examples: Deep Canvassing and Street Epistemology. These tend to use an iterative process which includes planning, testing, reflection, and refinement before the next iteration of public facing dialogue is implemented. Both are discussed by McRaney.

The Deep Canvass Institute began as a door-to-door lobbying effort aimed at changing public policy, and gradually morphed into a much deeper and broader process where participants learned to talk to complete strangers, creating bonds of mutual understanding grounded in the sharing of lived experience. Instead of drawing a person into a debate or presenting talking points, canvassers asked questions and adopted a curious and non-judgmental stance towards the experiences of the people they encountered. This shift in approach frequently led people away from prejudice, stigma, or fear, and towards empathy and a willingness to consider solutions. As the canvassers (to some extent) backed off on the effort to persuade, they found that people often began changing their own minds

about the topics being raised in the canvassing effort. One key advance came in the realization that inviting people to tell their own stories, and then listening carefully as the stories were told, would catalyze greater willingness on the part of the canvasee to take a broader point of view on the topics being discussed.

Street Epistemology is an interview process devised by Anthony Magnabosco, and now involving a community of practitioners, in which "you ask questions to explore a claim someone makes because they think it is true." Magnabosco asks participant volunteers, selected from passers-by, to "pick a claim that motivates you to behave," with the understanding that he will then "ask [them] questions in a respectful way" (McRaney 219). Magnabosco listens carefully and reflects back not just the cognitive content of what he hears but also the personal value and importance of the claim. He also, from time to time, shares his perspective, often to touch on common ground or similar experiences. Of particular note is the point at which a Street Epistemology interview is brought to a close:

> [Magnabosco] felt satisfied that together they had helped Delia discover her true reasons for continuing to believe [in God], and that he had helped her consider whether they justified her confidence. His job as a street epistemologist was done for now, and he wished her well. (221)

Magnabosco's approach to his

dialogue partners is devoid of any attempt to persuade, even though he was originally motivated to undertake Street Epistemology dialogues because, being at one time "an angry atheist," he had wanted to confront "street preachers who stand in front yelling at people." "After six years and hundreds of conversations," McRaney observes, "Anthony said his anger had subsided." (224)

Derek Black

Derek Black's story exemplifies the importance of relationship building and friendship as the foundations of lasting transformation. Derek was raised as a white supremacist in the USA, is the child of Don Black, founder of the alt-right *Stormfront* online community, and the godchild of former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke. As such, Derek was to some extent seen as the heir apparent to the leadership of the entire white nationalist movement (Saslow 6). While on campus, attending college away from family, Derek started to befriend several Jewish people and others with a multicultural outlook and attended many Friday Jewish Shabbat (Sabbath) dinners over the course of two years. Derek recalls the conversation during those dinners:

I would say, "This is what I believe about I.Q. differences, I have 12 different studies that have been published over the years, here's the journal that's put this stuff together, I believe that this is true, that race predicts I.Q. and that there were I.Q. differences in races." And they would come back with 150 more recent, more well researched studies and explain to me how statistics works and we would go back and forth until I would come to the end of that argument and I'd say, Yes that makes sense, that [old view of mine] does not hold together and I'll remove that from my ideological toolbox but everything else is still there. And we did that over a year or two on one thing after another until I got to a point where I didn't believe [the racist party line] anymore. ("Conversation")

Those friends helped Derek to develop trust, to explore their thoughts without seeking to shame them, even though they eventually argued the facts. The group managed to establish rapport and a safe space to converse, in order to continue those Friday night dinners over sufficient time to effect a transformation. We assume each session must have ended on a positive note, or they would not have agreed to meet again and again. In an interview with Krista Tippett, Derek Black stated something important about the rapport that was built during those two years: "It wasn't the first time that somebody had told me that racism is bad. It was just the first time that I'd been willing to listen to it." Derek's Jewish friend, Matthew Stevenson, highlighted a crucial point: "I think it's also worth

pointing out that over those two years, I was legitimately friends with Derek, even when I frankly didn't know exactly where he stood" (Tippett).

In this touching story, trust and rapport almost entirely *preceded* conscious agreement. We believe this exemplifies a fundamental truth about TD and the transformation of discourses.

Daryl Davis

Daryl Davis is an example of someone who knows the importance of not setting out to argue the other person into changing their mind or behavior, but rather simply seeking to find common ground, and allowing changes of heart and mind to spring naturally from that discovery.

Daryl is a rhythm and blues musician and activist whose efforts to fight racism have convinced a number of Klansmen to leave and denounce the Ku Klux Klan. As an African American who spent his early childhood abroad, Davis' first experience with the irrationality of blatant racism upon returning to the United States led him on a path of learning about the origins and basis for racist attitudes. He approached dialogue based on his sincere curiosity, openness to friendship, and a quest to find common ground. He stated, "once the friendship blossoms, the Klansmen realize that their hate may be misguided." He suggests, "If you spend five minutes with your worst enemy—it doesn't have to be about race, it could be about anything . . . you will find that you both have something in common.

As you build upon those commonalities, you're forming a relationship and as you build that relationship, you're forming a friendship. That's what would happen. I didn't convert anybody. They saw the light and converted themselves" (Brown).

Even though he emphasizes that he doesn't "convert" anyone—a point that resonates with the insights of McRaney, and at a fundamental level with the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá—his methods certainly seem to be effective at helping them find room in their hearts to convert themselves.

The extraordinary power of Davis' example lies in his explicit and precise refusal to countenance Othering. He thus goes directly to the heart of the matter, and builds bridges to people who have othered him, who consider him their "worst enemy."

Megan Phelps-Roper

This story is about the importance of empathy, curiosity, and refraining from judgement of others. It is also about the use of framing questions, and patiently awaiting the answers, allowing others to find their own wisdom at their own pace.

Megan Phelps-Roper is the granddaughter of Fred Phelps, founder of the Westboro Baptist Church, and was once one of the church's loudest members. The church became infamous for protest picketing, including the use of offensive chants and signs, at events ranging from soldiers' funerals to LGBTQ pride parades. Megan was

active in the church starting at age five. Later, she helped with church outreach through online debates on Twitter and high-profile street picketing. It was therefore a surprise when she withdrew from the fellowship at the age of twenty-six. Megan credits several people as having influenced her leaving, and they all had one thing in common: they approached her with curiosity and humor, not hatred. When people approached her with genuine questions in this fashion, it enabled her to lower her guard. Gradually, as she continued hearing questions about the church's beliefs that she just couldn't answer, she came to perceive contradictions in the church's beliefs and practices (Eschler). Megan continues to share her journey. She speaks publicly about the value of empathy when speaking with others, and works with law enforcement to conduct anti-extremism workshops.

‘Abdu'l-Bahá

There is much written about ‘Abdu'l-Bahá that is relevant to any discussion of TD, because of His masterful exercise of the powers of listening and reasoning. The eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá is considered the Bahá'í Faith's perfect Exemplar. The Bahá'í writings affirm that "in the person of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized" (Shoghi Effendi 134). ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's magnetic personality and His penetrating insights provide us with rich examples of His humility, kindness, generosity, concern for others, and dedication to service. One observer[22] reports Bahá'u'lláh's comments on the proper method of teaching the Bahá'í Faith, in which He offers ‘Abdu'l-Bahá as an example:

> [Teachers of the Cause of God should] not engage in disputation leading to and ending with obstinate refusal and hostility, because the other person would consider himself worsted and defeated. . . . One ought to say: right, admitted, but look at the matter in this other way, and judge for yourself whether it is true or false; of course it should be said with courtesy, with kindliness, with consideration. Then the other person will listen, will not seek to answer back and to marshal proofs in repudiation. He will agree, because he comes to realize that the purpose has not been to engage in verbal battle and to gain mastery over him. . . . [‘Abdu'l-Bahá] gives a willing ear to any manner of senseless talk, to such an extent that the other person says to himself: He is trying to learn from me. Then, gradually, by such means as the other person cannot perceive, He gives him insight and understanding. (Balyuzi 27)

22 Hájí Mírzá Haydar-‘Alí, either quoting or closely paraphrasing Bahá'u'lláh, as quoted in Hasan M. Balyuzi, *‘Abdu'l-Bahá: The Centre of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*.

Howard Colby Ives, whose account of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's meeting with a minister began this paper, further wrote of Him:

> In all of my many opportunities of meeting, of listening to and talking with 'Abdu'l-Bahá I was impressed, and constantly more deeply impressed, with His method of teaching souls. . . . He did not attempt to reach the mind alone. He sought the soul . . . with an illuminating radiance which lifted the hearer to a higher plane of consciousness. . . . He never argued, of course. Nor did He press a point. He left one free. There was never an assumption of authority, rather He was ever the personification of humility. (39–40)

Throughout these stories, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is portrayed as a vibrant and dynamic personality Who, with the mingling of humility and majesty, wisdom, and detachment, always considered the needs of the other. Over and over stories are told of how He made people feel safe, loved, and listened to. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's dynamic personality can well serve as a model for those who are seeking to foster TD.

Conclusion

When the Universal House of Justice calls on Bahá'ís to "make meaningful contributions to various important discourses prevalent in society" and then to "elevate the discussion above the acrimony and contention that so often prevent discourses of society from progressing" (Letter dated 18 Jan. 2019), it is inviting us to enter into the very sinews of human civilization and work for its betterment. While a central goal for Bahá'ís in this area may be to help foster the spirit and practice of consultation into more and more discursive spaces, we believe that TD can often serve as a crucial tool for finding an entry point, and reforging relationships into a mold that can, in time, support true consultation.

We have argued that TD is a distinct, analyzable form of interaction that can be systematically developed and trained for, and can (and should) be sustained in a community setting. TD invites transformation in all its participants and is thus coupled to emotional, intellectual, and spiritual personal growth. It inherently offers the prospect of deepening existing relationships and fostering new ones, and thus enriches and strengthens personal and local community life.

A few moments of reflection show that it has never, to date, been possible for discourses to reach full maturity, and, thus, their full scope. This implies that full scope of TD also cannot be fully known or appreciated in the present day. For example: global discourses could not exist in a world where the horizon of most people's lives implied ignorance of much of what went on elsewhere. A global vision was never truly feasible until the second half of the twentieth century when technology helped transcend global distances. TD

has its role to play in helping the development of a global vision take root, and thus deserves our focused attention, systematic development, and application in as many venues and social levels as possible. We see this activity as potentially being a great force for good in the world, canalizing forces of positive change.

While examples pointing in the direction of TD are not lacking, it is clear that this kind of dialogue needs to extend much further if our public discourses are to be cured of their dysfunctionalities. Further work, in the form of academic research and practical experience, is needed to support this extension. Among the areas of inquiry that merit further attention, the following stand out:

- Further specifying TD's properties and processes, and accumulating illustrative examples that clarify its nuances and offer guidance to practitioners at all skill levels.
- Elaborating on the synergy between TD and community building, and building networks of local communities to benefit from each other's experience, creativity, and learning in this area. TD can be consultatively developed, refined, and passed on to others through example and instruction. The glob-

al Bahá'í Community, organically interconnected through the Administrative Order, may be particularly well placed to contribute to this area of learning.
- Exploring what motivates people to enter into TD. The pain inflicted by dysfunctional public discourses is one obvious candidate: many of us have borne the costs of alienation at community and family gatherings, and may be motivated to find a way to talk to each other without quarreling. At a higher level, differences of perspective and opinion, promulgated by discursive dysfunctionalities, can paralyze local action or lead to poor decisions, resulting in the extreme cases in death or catastrophe. Research into how to generate motivation to participate in TD without the need for these painful catalysts is called for.
- Examining the relationship between TD and the elevation of discourses. Questions that might be investigated include: Are there distinct modalities of transformation? What works, and what

doesn't? How stable are the resulting changes? How often, and to what extent, do these changes result in the restructuring of a community or a discourse?

- Building out the philosophical context of TD, particularly focusing an epistemological analysis of discursive dysfunctionalities, and an ethical inquiry into our obligation to overcome them. Such an examination might draw on the works of Smith and Karlberg, already mentioned, as well as Peels on the ethical obligations underlying epistemology, and Dalmiya and Code on the foundational role of knowledge of self and other in a wider epistemology that concerns itself with a knowledge of things.

There is ample room for large numbers to contribute to learning in these and other areas. It is our hope that more and more individuals will draw on the characteristics of TD in both their day-to-day communication, and in their efforts to contribute to public discourses. While the strategies are relatively simple, the contribution those employing them can make is potentially profound: given how public discourses shape human activity, to elevate a discourse is to make a contribution, however humble, to the ongoing development of human civilization. It is one of the pressing concerns of the age in which we live.

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What Does Spirituality Look Like?[1]

ROBERT SARRACINO

Abstract

The concept of spirituality defies a rigorous definition, much like some fundamental concepts in mathematics and physics. However, we may gain an understanding of this vital religious concept by asking what spirituality "looks like." In this paper, following a brief overview of the concepts of spirit and spirituality in the Bahá'í writings, we examine a letter of the Universal House of Justice that gives us a picture of what spirituality should look like today, as the Bahá'í community pursues its work of creating vibrant communities. We then explore the question of whether, and to what degree, the social sciences can investigate the phenomenon of spirituality as central to human nature, arguing that they can productively adopt spiritual reality as a background assumption, whose validity can then be evaluated.

Résumé

Le concept de spiritualité échappe à une définition rigoureuse, tout comme certains concepts fondamentaux en mathématiques et en physique. Cependant, on peut mieux comprendre ce concept religieux essentiel en se demandant à quoi « ressemble » la spiritualité. Dans cet article, après avoir fait un bref tour d'horizon des concepts d'esprit et de spiritualité dans les écrits bahá'ís, nous examinons une lettre de la Maison universelle de justice qui nous donne un aperçu de ce à quoi la spiritualité devrait ressembler aujourd'hui, alors que la communauté bahá'íe poursuit son travail de création de communautés dynamiques. Nous nous demandons ensuite si, et dans quelle mesure, les sciences sociales peuvent étudier le phénomène de la spiritualité en tant qu'élément principal de la nature humaine, en soutenant qu'elles peuvent efficacement choisir la réalité spirituelle comme hypothèse de travail, dont la validité peut ensuite être évaluée.

Resumen

El concepto de espiritualidad desafía una rigurosa definición, muy parecida a al-

gunos conceptos fundamentales en las matemáticas y la física. Sin embargo, podríamos lograr un entendimiento de este vital concepto religioso preguntando a qué "se parece" la espiritualidad. En este artículo, después de un breve bosquejo de los conceptos del espíritu y la espiritualidad en los escritos Bahá'ís, examinamos una carta de la Casa Universal de Justicia que nos da un panorama sobre a qué se debe parecer la espiritualidad en tiempos actuales, a medida que la Comunidad Bahá'í prosigue su labor de crear comunidades vibrantes. En seguida, exploramos la pregunta de que si y a que grado las ciencias sociales pueden investigar el fenómeno de la espiritualidad como un asunto central a la naturaleza humana, argumentando que ellas pueden productivamente adoptar la realidad espiritual como un supuesto, cuya validez puede entonces ser evaluada.

Introduction

The term "spirituality" permeates Bahá'í writings, discourse, and thought. "All men," Bahá'u'lláh writes, "have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization" (*Gleanings* 109:2). This civilization has both material and spiritual elements ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 227). In the series of global plans laid before the Bahá'í community by the Universal House of Justice, with the single aim of "the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever greater measures," Bahá'ís are called upon to "learn . . . how to bring about spiritual and material progress" (30 December 2021). This learning project is at the center of the framework for action for Bahá'í communities that has emerged and evolved

over the past twenty-five years.[2]

"Spirit" and "spirituality" do not have rigorous, agreed upon definitions in religion or in philosophy. This is not inherently problematic. At the foundations of mathematics and the sciences, for instance, we find a number of undefined terms. In geometry, terms like "point," "line," and "plane"—elements that are fundamental to this branch of knowledge—are formally labeled as "undefined terms." In physics there isn't such a formal labelling, but fundamental notions including "mass," "energy," "force," and "momentum" stubbornly resist definition, and have continuously been revisited by scientists and philosophers of science (see, for example, Jammer, Sarracino).[3]

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2   See, for example, The Universal House of Justice letter dated 27 December 2005 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

3   As a concrete example, Newton famously defined mass as "quantity of matter," a definition that, inexplicably and confusedly, is still used in some elementary textbooks today. As I further elaborate,

Eventually physicists and philosophers of science became dissatisfied with this metaphysical concept of mass, and rather than the vague "quantity of matter," began to think of mass more as a coefficient in the equation of motion. Euler was the first in this movement when, in 1760, he defined mass as the ratio of force and acceleration. The concept of "force" itself, however, came under attack in the nineteenth century as being an "obscure metaphysical notion." It

Despite this inability to pin down a formal definition, there are relationships among these terms and concepts that can be expressed in equations. Physicists gain a familiarity with their discipline's fundamental terms and concepts by coming to understand these equations and what they represent with respect to the motion of discrete entities and waves, and the interactions between them.

Just as the presence of undefined terms in mathematics and physics is not problematic, so the lack of rigorous definitions for spirit and spirituality is not problematic in the Bahá'í Faith. There is a unity of thought within the Bahá'í community as to the implications of the terms and what they refer to. Bahá'ís come to understand what spirituality *is* and what it *is not* through two complementary avenues of endeavor. The first avenue is detailed study of the writings and guidance of the Faith. The second avenue consists of efforts to translate those writings and guidance, and the principles and injunctions contained therein, into action in personal and community life, and in the functioning of Bahá'í institutions.

Through these two means the Bahá'í community is able not only to reach a collective, albeit continuously evolving, understanding of what is meant by spirit and spirituality, but also to contribute to answering a more practical question: "What does spirituality *look like*?"

It is to this question that the present paper seeks to make a contribution. It proceeds in three parts. First, it grapples with ontological questions about spirit and spirituality. There is no ambition to do this with great rigor; the goal is simply to suggest a few parameters by which we can understand enough about these concepts to ground the more practical question.

Second, it looks to recent guidance from the Universal House of Justice, specifically a paragraph from the 30 December 2021 letter outlining the qualities and characteristics of "the enkindled souls being raised up through the processes" (¶ 4) of the current series of Bahá'í plans for Jammer, Sarracino the advancement of communities, as a source for outlining what the spirituality the Bahá'í community attempts to act out looks like. Relying on guidance from the central institution of the Bahá'í Faith is particularly useful for our question, because the Universal House of Justice's letters are not only the agreed upon focal point of guidance for the global Bahá'í community, but are also crafted in reflection of what that Body sees emerging from the actual experience of Bahá'ís—individuals, communities, and institutions—worldwide.

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was Ernst Mach who developed the working definition from which twentieth century attempts to define mass have developed, and which is used, more or less, in textbooks today. . . . Ernst Mach formulated mass in terms of mass-ratio, that is, the "negative inverse ratio of mutually induced accelerations" of two interacting bodies. This itself, however, has problems (Sarracino 10–13).

Third, the paper turns to how the question "What does spirituality look like?" might help the social sciences come to better grips with a phenomenon—spirituality—whose ontological reality they are incapable of directly assessing, yet one that intimately shapes the motivations and actions of myriad people worldwide. Since those motivations and actions *are* proper studies for the social sciences, the question of how these areas of human inquiry can "quantify" spirituality is an important one. This paper's thesis is that it can best do so by taking the existence of a transcendent spiritual nature in humans as a background assumption to produce evidence from data, and that this evidence can be used to support or falsify well-formulated hypotheses about human spiritual nature.

SPIRIT AND SPIRITUALITY
IN THE BAHÁ'Í WRITINGS:
A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The term "spirituality" is understood in a variety of ways by different individuals and communities in wider society.[4] The views of those unaffiliated with any particular religion range from positive—if often vague—conceptions of spirituality, to the view that spiritual belief is a symptom of human irrationality, referring to ghosts, spirits, and other intangible entities. Some even view spirituality as destructive, leading to anti-social behavior and violence. The problem is compounded by the apparent irrelevance of the concept of "spirit" (and allied concepts like "soul") to the natural sciences, and by the ambiguous reception of the concept in the social sciences, which either consider it meaningless within the predominant materialist paradigm,[5] or simply too difficult to observe the action or effect of in an empirically testable manner.

In contrast to this lack of consensus around what is meant by spirit and spirituality in discourse generally, there is, from what I have observed, a unity of understanding on this topic within the Bahá'í community. It is a characteristically Bahá'í unity—a unity in diversity, in which there is no need to perfectly reconcile the inevitable range of perspectives individuals bring to the question, since this range admits a richer collective understanding than any one perspective could afford.[6]

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4   An illustrative example of this variety can be found in Sena et al.'s 2021 study of the concepts or definitions of spirituality used by researchers in the medical field alone, in which they find, and attempt to categorize, some 166 different definitions.

5   For a more comprehensive treatment, see William B. Hurlbut, "Science, Ethics and the Human Spirit" in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*.

6   Indeed, a Bahá'í perspective on this, as on many metaphysical topics, begins with the understanding that the human mind can never perfectly grasp the ontology of anything (*Gleanings* 26), let alone entities, concepts, realms, etc. that are inherently beyond embodied human perception, or beyond the human's own ontological station. As with models of reality

Yet it is nonetheless a unity, in that it builds on certain core propositions in the Bahá'í writings that combine to make "spirit" and "spirituality" *usable* concepts.

From the outset we should distinguish between what might be called the ontology of spirit on the one hand, and the acquisition of spiritual capacities and the expression of spirituality by humans on the other hand.

ONTOLOGY OF SPIRIT

SPIRITUALITY AS RELATIVE

A useful starting place is 'Abdu'l-Bahá discussion of the unity, and hierarchy, of creation:

> [T]he truth is that the world of existence is a single world, although its stations are manifold in accordance with the manifold realities of things. For instance, the world of mineral, plant, and animal existence is the same world. Despite this, *the animal world in relation to the world of the vegetable is a spiritual reality* and another world and abode. (*Amr va Khalq* 1:202 provisional translation, qtd. in Phelps; emphasis added)

Spirituality is thus relative: each higher level is a spiritual reality relative to a lower level. The animal has the power of the senses and powers of thought that are absent in the plant. To use the terminology of modern science, these powers are *emergent*, appearing as more complex organizations of matter emerge from simpler ones.[7] At each stage of progression, from the lower to the higher levels, the higher incorporates all the inherent attributes of the lower and adds new attributes (*Promulgation* 85). The lower, by its very nature, remains unaware of, and even denies the reality of, the powers of the higher (*Selections* 163:2).

It would seem to follow from this conception that God—if we might venture to say anything about the "Unknowable Essence"—is the ultimate Spirit, in that there is no perspective from which One Who stands not merely at the apex of creation but utterly beyond it (as its uttermost Source) does not remain "higher."

SPIRIT AS ONTOLOGICAL, UNDERLYING REALITY

"Spirit" is not only a description of the qualities of one entity relative to another, but also, according to Bahá'í thought, an underlying, ontological

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in science, the usefulness of whatever concept we have of a transcendent reality is a good indicator of its relationship to truth.

7   Nobel laureate Philip Anderson describes emergence in these terms:

> The behavior of large and complex aggregates of elementary particles, it turns out, is not to be understood in terms of a simple extrapolation of the properties of a few particles. Instead, at each level of complexity entirely new properties appear . . . (393).

reality. Used in this sense of the term, we find (for instance) that 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Some Answered Questions* refers to a mineral, a vegetable, an animal, and a human spirit — the human spirit or "rational soul" having two aspects, as will be discussed further. Beyond these, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes, there is a "heavenly spirit" or "spirit of faith," through which the higher aspect of the human spirit is awakened and animated, and which itself "proceeds through the breath of the Holy Spirit," "the mediator between God and His creation," which is associated with the Manifestation of God (ch. 36).[8]

To understand how "spirit" as a fundamental ontological reality relates to the mundane reality we perceive through our senses, we might analogize to the concept of fields as understood in physics. According to current models, at the most fundamental level matter is comprised of fields—such as the Higgs field—that permeate all space and time, with fundamental particles being particular instantiations of fields. Only very recently—in 2012—have we actually observed an instantiation of the Higgs field; i.e. a Higgs particle, generated in an experiment at CERN. We can analogously conceive of a human "field" permeating all of reality (purely by way of analogy, and without suggesting that the human spirit has a physical and / or measurable ontology). When the conditions are right—when an organism appears with the requisite level of complexity—the human field instantiates itself in an individual soul—what has been called "the rational soul" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 55:5). As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "if a thousand million years hence, the component elements of man are brought together, measured out in the same proportion, combined in the same manner, and subjected to the same interaction with other beings, exactly the same man will come into existence" (46:7).

Spirituality from the Human Perspective

To explore how the ideas of underlying ontological spirit and spirituality as a relative condition relate to each other, we can consider spirituality as an inherent, yet latent, property of the human being. Bahá'u'lláh explains that in the human being "are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed" (*Kitab-i-Íqán* 101). While these attributes and names are unchanging and eternal in God, and thus have an unchanging ontological existence, their expressions

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8   In some contexts, the Bahá'í writings distinguish clearly between the material and the spiritual as distinct realms of existence that are nevertheless unified as parts of one whole, with "[t]he physical universe [being] . . . in perfect correspondence with the spiritual or divine realm" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 93:1). A philosophical treatment of spirit in the Bahá'í writings would explore the relationship between the various presentations of the concept in greater detail than is necessary here.

as spiritual qualities by human beings is not automatic:

> Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess. . . . Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 161–62)

The attributes of God within human reality thus exist only as potential. They must be developed in order to become manifest—through education and as a result of the individual's own volition (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* ch. 77).

From this perspective, William S. Hatcher proposes a working definition of spiritual growth as "the process of the full, adequate, proper and harmonious development of one's spiritual capacities" ("Concept" 5).

Key to this process is self-reflection. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that man's nature "is threefold: animal, human and divine" (*Promulgation* 139:12). The "human," one may conclude from the Bahá'í writings, is that "rational faculty with which God hath endowed the essence of man." This rational faculty is an inextricable and distinguishing facet of the human spirit (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 83:1).[9]

It distinguishes humans from animals, for "the animal perceives sensible things but cannot perceive conceptual realities" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 48:6). It is a faculty that the individual, through volition, can turn to the animal nature and so choose to descend to that level of being, or orient to the divine and thus acquire the attributes pertaining to *that* world. It is in that sense, one can surmise, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the "human spirit" as having "two aspects":

> But this human spirit has two aspects: one divine and one satanic—that is, it is capable of both the greatest perfection and the greatest deficiency. Should it acquire virtues, it is the noblest of all things; and should it acquire vices, it becomes the most vile. (*Some Answered Questions* 36:5)

I would thus restate Hatcher's definition of spiritual growth to draw out an implicit feature: spiritual growth is "the process of the full, adequate, proper, harmonious, *and self-reflective*

> The virtues of humanity are many, but science is the most noble of them all. The distinction which man enjoys above and beyond the station of the animal is due to this paramount virtue. It is a bestowal of God; it is not material; it is divine. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 20:2)

It is in this sense that one can call science a collective spiritual enterprise.

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9   This rational capacity of the human spirit is the source of science:

development of one's spiritual capacities." In other words, we use the powers of the "human" spirit—including the rational power of self-reflection—to acquire the "divine" spirit.

Spiritual growth can thus be considered a process of *growth towards being*, to develop one's divine capacities.[10]

While the essential ontology of the human being is spiritual, the extent to which that spiritual essence develops—or remains largely overridden by the lower animal nature that, in relation to the human spirit, is material—depends on this process of growth ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 65).[11]

What, then, is the nature of the divine capacities to which this process is directed? There are myriad passages in the Bahá'í writings specifying some of these capacities. "The purpose of the one true God in manifesting Himself," Bahá'u'lláh writes in one instance,

> is to summon all mankind to truthfulness and sincerity, to piety and trustworthiness, to resignation and submissiveness to the Will of God, to forbearance and kindliness, to uprightness and wisdom. His object is to array every man with the mantle of a saintly character, and to adorn him with the ornament of holy and goodly deeds. (*Gleanings* 137:4)

Yet there is also a sense in which what spirituality looks like—the way in which we must express our spiritual capacities, including both the rationality of the human spirit and the qualities of the divine spirit—will be specific to our time and place. Since this is what motivates my examination of recent guidance of the Universal House of Justice in particular, it merits further exploration.

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10   In section of his paper I have quoted, Hatcher uses the terms "spiritual growth" and "spirituality" interchangeably. There is a strong sense, however, in which spirituality can be considered a condition or state one strives to attain, as reflected in a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi: "How to attain spirituality is, indeed, a question to which every young man and woman must sooner or later try to find a satisfactory answer" (qtd. in *Importance of Prayer* no. 40). There need not be any contradiction, of course, between viewing spirituality as a process or as a state. The thoughts, words, and actions by which a person at a given level of spiritual development can progress to a further level are the very same thoughts, words, and actions that characterize the relative level of spirituality that this person thus attains. The qualities reflected in the guidance of the Universal House of Justice discussed in the next section, for instance, can be considered in either light

11   "But the life of man is not so restricted; it is divine, eternal, not mortal and sensual. For him a spiritual existence and

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livelihood is prepared and ordained in the divine creative plan. . . . Therefore, consider how base a nature it reveals in man that, notwithstanding the favors showered upon him by God, he should lower himself into the animal sphere, be wholly occupied with material needs, attached to this mortal realm, imagining that the greatest happiness is to attain wealth in this world" (*Promulgation* 65:4).

Evolution over Time, Collective Expression, and Systematicity

If this is indeed the time of "the coming of age of the entire human race," as the Bahá'í Faith asserts, it should be no surprise that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh not only renews, but updates, our concept of spirituality (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 163). We can expect spirituality, on the one hand, to bear similarities to understandings or concepts of the past, but also, in this age, to exhibit new characteristics. The individual's spirituality looks different in maturity than in adolescence or in childhood. As the capacity of the individual to express spirituality in action grows as the individual matures, [12] we can expect the same to be true of humanity as a whole.[13]

Indeed, the collective dimension of spiritual expression can be considered as another kind of "emergence." In nature, certain properties of matter are emergent in that they appear in collections of particles but are absent in the individual particles that comprise them. Fluidity and its reciprocal, viscosity, are examples of this emergence: the individual particles of, say, a body of water do not have fluidity, but the body itself, composed of these particles, exhibits this property.

Similarly, while there are aspects of spirituality that can be expressed individually, other facets of spirituality are emergent, appearing when individuals organize themselves and work together. For instance, the individual is endowed with the power of understanding, which is a spiritual power relative to the animal. When individuals organize themselves to, say, investigate in concert some phenomenon of nature, this spirituality emerges as a property of the group. Although the individual may engage in scientific activity, science does not arise from the individual: it is an emergent phenomenon arising from individuals working in concert. Similarly, although individuals engage in religious activity, religion itself does not come from the individual: religion arises from entire communities working in concert. It is when followers of a particular Messenger of God assemble and work together that the phenomenon of religion appears. Religion and science can thus both be considered emergent spiritual enterprises.

We should expect, then, that all three protagonists in the civilization-building process described by the Universal House of Justice—the individual, the community and the institutions—can develop and express spirituality (28

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12   See 'Abdu'l-Bahá on "the difference between the perfect man and the child" (*Promulgation* 53).

13   This may partially explain why spirituality is viewed as naïve and / or superstitious by many, including some scientifically minded people. Conceptions of spirituality suited to previous stages of humanity's collective evolution may, if they linger in the public discourse on spirituality, obscure more relevant conceptions. Science tends to replace outmoded paradigms over time; religion may need to learn to do the same to retain, or regain, its relevance.

December 2010). Spirituality in one of these three protagonists will look different than spirituality in another and, as each protagonist evolves over time, its spirituality will be expressed in new ways. The development of spirituality on the level of the institutions will be reflected in a new aim: "not to control but to nurture and guide" (2 March 2013). The development of a new level of spirituality on the part of the community will be seen as it

> takes on the challenge of sustaining an environment where the powers of individuals, who wish to exercise self-expression responsibly in accordance with the common weal and the plans of institutions, multiply in unified action. (2 March 2013)

Clearly, these expressions of spirituality are emergent, in the sense that the individual, no matter how advanced, cannot achieve them. They require institutions and communities that are progressing along their own paths of spiritual development.

Spirituality appropriate to humanity's age of maturity will also be progressively expressed in the relationships between the three protagonists:

> At the heart of the learning process is inquiry into the nature of the relationships that bind the individual, the community, and the institutions of society—actors on the stage of history who have been locked in a struggle

for power throughout time. In this context, the assumption that relations among them will inevitably conform to the dictates of competition, a notion that ignores the extraordinary potential of the human spirit, has been set aside in favour of the more likely premise that their harmonious interactions can foster a civilization befitting a mature humanity. (2 March 2013)

Before exploring "what spirituality looks like" today, a final general consideration merits mention. Implicit in the educational paradigm for spiritual development, and explicit in many places in the Bahá'í writings, is the principle that spirituality is developed *systematically* at both the individual and collective level. It is thus no surprise that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, which is intended to "effect a fundamental transformation in the whole basis of human society, which will involve the spiritualization of mankind" (Universal House of Justice *in* Research Dept. *Family* 74), is described by Shoghi Effendi as "scientific in its method" (Letter High Commissioner).

Indeed, the Universal House of Justice has progressively outlined a framework for action for the global Bahá'í community, appropriate to its level of development and systematic in its approach.[14]

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14   For a more focused discussion see Stephen Friberg, "Revelation as Scientific in its Method: Science, Diversity, Consultation, and Learning in Action."

A document prepared on behalf of the Universal House of Justice explains that

> [w]hen efforts are carried out in a learning mode—characterized by constant action, reflection, consultation, and study—visions and strategies are re-examined time and again. . . . The learning process, which is given direction through appropriate institutional arrangements, unfolds in a way that resembles the growth and differentiation of a living organism. Haphazard change is avoided, and continuity of action maintained. (OSED)

The systematic work of the community is a corollary of the practices that have always been at the core of the individual Bahá'í's spiritual life, and that are reflected in other religious traditions: regular prayer, fasting, and immersion in the sacred writings of the Faith amongst others. At both the individual and collective level, then, it is clear that spirituality is not acquired passively. That does not mean that it cannot be an *inner* process, of course, but rather that it is acquired through progressive refinement requiring active, systematic engagement of one's faculties.

What Does Spirituality Look Like?

Having explored a few characteristics of a Bahá'í conception of spirituality, we can now turn to the central question, and make it more precise: "What does spirituality look like *today, for individuals, communities and institutions*?"

In its pivotal message of 30 December 2021, the Universal House of Justice clearly outlines the task before us, of "building a society that consciously pursues [the] collective purpose" set out for it by Bahá'u'lláh—to "work for the betterment of the world and live together in concord and harmony"—and explains that this is "the work not only of this generation but of generations to come." In the same message the Universal House of Justice outlines three areas of learning that are most crucial *at this time*:[15]

- Learning how to raise up vibrant, outward-looking communities;

- Learning how to bring about material and spiritual progress;

- Learning how to contribute to the discourses that influence the direction of that progress.

In light of this mandate placed before the Bahá'í community and its

15   Presumably, for the duration of the series of Plans that will occupy the Bahá'í community until the year 2046. Global Plans of fixed durations have been set in place by the central institution of the Bahá'í Faith since the time of the Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, and guide the community's growth as well as its contribution to wider society.

collaborators, spirituality looks like that set of qualities and attributes that will best equip humanity to engage in these three areas of learning over the next quarter century.

As a document that not only clarifies the path before a community dedicated to progressively enacting spiritual behaviour, but reflects back to that community what it is already learning about and putting into practice, this letter, I propose, can itself serve as a rich resource for answering our central question.

In eleven sentences of paragraph four, the letter paints a portrait of "the enkindled souls being raised up through the processes of the Plan":

They are committed to the prosperity of all, recognizing that the welfare of individuals rests in the welfare of society at large. They are loyal citizens who eschew partisanship and the contest for worldly power. Instead, they are focused on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation for making decisions. They emphasize qualities and attitudes—such as trustworthiness, cooperation, and forbearance—that are building blocks of a stable social order. They champion rationality and science as essential for human progress. They advocate tolerance and understanding, and with the inherent oneness of humanity uppermost in their minds, they view everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with, and they strive to foster fellow feeling even among groups who may traditionally have been hostile to one another. They are conscious of how the forces of materialism are at work around them, and their eyes are wide open to the many injustices that persist in the world, yet they are equally clear sighted about the creative power of unity and humanity's capacity for altruism. They see the power that true religion possesses to transform hearts and overcome distrust, and so, with confidence in what the future holds, they labour to cultivate the conditions in which progress can occur. They share their beliefs liberally with others, remaining respectful of the freedom of conscience of every soul, and they never impose their own standards on anyone. And while they would not pretend to have discovered all the answers, they are clear about what they have learned and what they still need to learn. Their efforts advance to the alternating rhythm of action and reflection; setbacks leave them unfazed. (30 December 2021 ¶ 4)

With an understanding of spirituality as both *inherent*—in the individual—and *emergent*—finding expression at the collective levels of the community and the institution—we can see in this paragraph two clear directives: a guide to individuals engaged in the community-building process, and a

characterization of the qualities that are destined to emerge on both community and institutional levels as the work progresses.

In this section, I explore five dimensions of what spirituality looks like today that emerge from this paragraph: embracing rationality, developing clarity of vision, acquiring particular spiritual qualities, espousing new concepts of power, and working toward reconciliation.

EMBRACING RATIONALITY

Spirituality today must fully embrace rationality and all its fruits, including science. Throughout the Bahá'í writings it is emphasized that, at all times, religious truth must conform to reason, and science and religion[16] must work together. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá underscores, "true science is reason and reality, and religion is essentially reality and pure reason; therefore, the two must correspond" (*Promulgation* 44:8). Although the divine is a higher spiritual power than the human or rational power, in this day when the sciences have become "bridges to

reality" (*Selections* 72:3), spirituality involves embracing fully the rational faculty and its fruits. This is clearly seen in the Universal House of Justice's characterization, in its letter dated 30 December 2021, of the "enkindled souls":

- They champion rationality and science as essential for human progress;

- They promote the use of consultation in exploring reality, developing understanding, and in decision-making;

- Their efforts advance to "the alternating rhythm of action and reflection."

In past dispensations the majority of humanity was illiterate, and science as we know it today did not exist. It is no surprise that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, originating in the nineteenth century, would emphasize universal education, the development of critical thinking skills, and an orientation towards science and reason. In one of His talks given in America 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes,

[W]e must arise to service in the world of morality, for human morals are in need of readjustment. We must also render service to the world of intellectuality in order that the minds of men may increase in power and become keener in perception, assisting the intellect of man to attain its

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16   Much could be written about the relationship between spirituality and religion, which today is understood from many different perspectives, and in quite contradictory ways. For the purposes of this paper, I simply assert (without trying to prove) the relationship implied by the statement written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi that "spiritual development . . . is the very foundation and purpose of the Religion of God" (in *Prayer and Devotional Life* 71).

supremacy so that the ideal virtues may appear. (*Promulgation* 105:3)

It is clear that the embrace of rationality is not a characteristic of spirituality today that is confined to the individual. Bahá'í communities as a whole are learning about emergent expressions of rationality that the isolated individual cannot achieve. These communities are currently applying a *method* to their three areas of learning that involves "an ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation" (Universal House of Justice, 24 July 2013). Consultation in particular is an inherently *collective* means whereby the rational faculty can be employed to explore material and spiritual reality, whether to make a decision or to simply advance understanding.[17]

In laying before the worldwide Bahá'í community the multiplicity of the tasks before it—tasks in which

"increasing attention needs to be given to . . . processes that seek to enhance the life of a community"—the Universal House of Justice emphasizes the importance of the community maintaining a systematic and scientific approach to its own development (Riḍván 2023). It must specifically continue to develop

the capacity to engage in systematic learning . . . a capacity that draws on insights arising from the Teachings and the accumulated store of human knowledge generated through scientific enquiry. As this capacity grows, much will be accomplished over the coming decades. (Riḍván 2023)

There is, of course, an individual responsibility to embrace rationality as well; and even in community processes such as consultation, it is the individual's contribution of reasoned argument that contributes to a whole greater than the sum of its parts. One vital contributor to the individual's rational inquiry is freedom of initiative. The spiritual world, even more than the physical world, is a vast world; a world to be explored. And just as the scientist requires a large measure of freedom in exploring physical reality—freedom to identify lines of inquiry, to hypothesize, to experiment—so a person on the spiritual path requires freedom of initiative to explore that world and garner its fruits. Similarly, communities require the freedom to "read their own reality" (Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010 ¶

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17   In companion papers in this collaborative exploration of the harmony of science and religion other authors have expanded on the role of consultation. See, in this issue, Andres Elvira Espinosa "'Justly and Without Bias': Consultation as a Technique for Mitigating Cognitive Biases," and Roger Neyman and Charlotte Wenninger, "Transformative Dialogue: A Key to Elevating Discourse" and, in vol. 33 no. 3 of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, Whitney White Kazemipour, "Even as the Waves of One Sea: Bahá'í Consultation's Implicit Cultural Support for the Clash of Differing Opinions" and Todd Smith, Becoming Attuned to Reality: Presuppositions and the Power of Learning in Action."

10), to explore that reality, and to advance on their own level and at their own pace. This reading of reality flows from a broader conception of rationality that draws on the powers of mind and spirit, including reference to the insights from both scientific and religious understanding.

One of the natural, inevitable and constructive features of individual initiative is that there will arise, in consultation, what 'Abdu'l-Bahá identifies as "the clash of differing opinions"—as opposed to the "clash of egos," which is almost always destructive. It is through the "clash of differing opinions" that "the shining spark of truth cometh forth" in consultation (*Selections* 44).[18]

DEVELOPING CLARITY OF VISION

Spirituality requires clarity of vision. Although practically one's work may be on a local level—with family, fellow-believers, colleagues, friends, neighbors, or a community—these groups in themselves are limited; that is, they are parts of the whole. A clear vision is a world-embracing vision, and is expressed in selfless service aimed at the betterment of the entire human race. Thus, the House of Justice says of the enkindled souls:

- They have the inherent oneness of humanity uppermost in mind;

- They are committed to the prosperity of all, recognizing that the welfare of individuals rests in the welfare of society at large;

- They are conscious of how the forces of materialism are at work around them, and their eyes are wide open to the many injustices that persist in the world, yet they are equally clear sighted about the creative power of unity and humanity's capacity for altruism. (30 December 2021 ¶ 4)

The faculty of vision, Bahá'u'lláh writes, is derived from the rational faculty (*Gleanings* 83:2), and is "the agent and guide for true knowledge." "Keenness of understanding," He elucidates, "is due to keenness of vision" (*Tablets* 4:7). Hence, clarity of vision is a crucial adjunct to embrace of the rational. Historically, many enterprises that had sound beginnings and potentially promising outcomes lost their way because, partly through narrow focus and partly through distractions arising from the "insistent self" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 206:9)—the animal side of human nature—a wider perspective was lost. This can be avoided if the wider perspective of the health of the entire human family—and the long-range goal of achieving the unity of the entire human race—is

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18   The continual "clash of opinions" has been one of the vital features of the collective enterprise of science throughout history. For a deeper discussion and analysis of the operation of this dynamic in Bahá'í consultation see White Kazemipour.

ever held in the consciousness of those working at the grassroots level.

ACQUIRING PARTICULAR SPIRITUAL QUALITIES

The demands of this period of time require the cultivation of particular, critical qualities. The Universal House of Justice emphasizes specific qualities of the enkindled souls:

- They emphasize qualities and attitudes—such as trustworthiness, cooperation, and forbearance—that are building blocks of a stable social order;

- They share their beliefs liberally with others, remaining respectful of the freedom of conscience of every soul, and they never impose their own standards on anyone;

- While they would not pretend to have discovered all the answers, they are clear about what they have learned and what they still need to learn. (30 December 2021)

Recalling our definition, building on Hatcher, of spiritual growth as the "full, adequate, proper, harmonious, and self-reflective development of one's spiritual capacities," we can nevertheless recognize that at each particular time in history certain qualities rise to the fore as being most conducive to individual and social progress. Cooperation and forbearance are of obvious importance in an age in which our very ability to speak civilly across lines of difference seems in many places to be eroding (see Wenninger and Neyman, this issue). As for trustworthiness, it must characterize any religious individual or community who seeks to contribute to the social good. Indeed, religion has acquired a bad name among many people of thought in the world, in no small part because of the gross and obvious hypocrisy of many religious leaders and religious organizations.[19]

Hypocrisy is so condemned that Bahá'u'lláh admonishes in one of His tablets,

> Be thou of the people of hellfire,
> but be not a hypocrite.
> (qtd. in *Trustworthiness* 38)

The spiritual qualities of generosity, respect and detachment, reflected in the balance struck by liberally sharing one's belief while never imposing one's standards on others, are equally critical today. The masses of humanity, the great majority of whom are religious, increasingly have nowhere to turn to find inspiration and positive models. One is reminded of Bahá'u'lláh's statement in the Book of Certitude:

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19   The other major cause of this disrepute, namely the disunity of sectarian attachments that plague so many religious communities and institutions today, further speaks to the need for cooperation and forbearance (Universal House of Justice, April 2002).

What "oppression" is more grievous than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it? (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 31)

On the one hand, the distrust among people who have become cynical about religion needs to be dispelled. On the other hand, those who are religious need to be shown in action what true religion is and what it can accomplish, in a measure that will attract those who have become disillusioned, and enable them to work together for a common purpose. Intellectual humility is equally important in this regard: to know that one has not discovered all the answers even as one is clear about what has been learned so far changes the nature of the invitation, from "join *me*" to "let *us* learn together." These qualities, nurtured in individuals and communities, can foster the kind of fellow feeling that will enable diverse people to work together.

Espousing A New Concept of Power

Bahá'u'lláh writes that the task of converting "satanic strength" into "heavenly power" is one that "We have been empowered to accomplish" (*Gleanings* 99:1). What is heavenly power? What is the new concept of power that He has been empowered to establish, and what changes in power structures and power relationships is His Revelation destined to bring about?

Like all similar questions, these can most practically be addressed in terms of current needs and current directions to be taken. In the paragraph under study, the Universal House of Justice makes a number of relevant observations about the "enkindled souls":

- They are loyal citizens who eschew partisanship and the contest for worldly power;

- They promote the use of consultation for making decisions;

- They view everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with;

- They see the power that true religion possesses to transform hearts;

- They labour to cultivate the conditions in which progress can occur. (30 December 2021 ¶ 4)

Science and religion are described by the Universal House of Justice as "two complementary systems of knowledge and practice by which human beings come to understand the world around them and through which civilization advances" (2 March 2013). Yet, throughout history, the knowledge generated by both science and religion has also been coopted by those who wield temporal power.

Scientific discovery leads to new technologies that can be used to improve life but also to serve the ends

of those who wish to exert power over others. 'Abdu'l-Bahá described the "destructive and infernal machines. . . . forces of demolition and the invention of fiery implements" of His own time as evidence that the current "civilization is conjoined with barbarism" (*Selections* 225:6). In the twentieth century, discoveries in physics enabled the development of nuclear weapons, while advances in psychology were also weaponized into techniques of persuasion designed to channel human activity into patterns of commercialization (Packard).

Religion, as the historical framework for spirituality, has also generated what we might call "social technologies." These technologies helped create stable and happy families, stable and progressive communities, and well-ordered societies. But through excess of zeal, ulterior motives, and thirst for power, other technologies have been developed that may have passed for spiritualization: forms of social control, coercion, demands for conformity, oppression of the spirit, and the tyranny of forced catechisms and beliefs.

The positive contributions of both science and religion show that each has the capacity to contribute to positive forms of power—to exert an influence on the world that changes it for the better. Yet this is not the sense in which power is often conceived. Animated by an often-unconscious culture of conflict (Karlberg, "Constructive Resilience" and "Constructive Imaginary"), our societies view power as a thing to be wrested from others and used against them in a zero-sum game. As the Universal House of Justice has written regarding the individual, institutions and community,

> Throughout human history, interactions among these three have been fraught with difficulties at every turn, with the individual clamouring for freedom, the institution demanding submission, and the community claiming precedence. . . . Today, in this age of transition, as humanity struggles to attain its collective maturity, such relationships—nay, the very conception of the individual, of social institutions, and of the community—continue to be assailed by crises too numerous to count. (28 December 2010)

A reconceptualization of power is central to reimagining the individual, community, and institution in a way that permits harmonious relationships between them. As the Universal House of Justice goes on to point out: "Every follower of Bahá'u'lláh knows well that the purpose of His Revelation is to bring into being a new creation" (28 December 2010).

We need, then, a new concept of power.

The writings and guidance of the Bahá'í Faith help us understand the relationship between spirituality and power. On the one hand, there is an unambiguous affirmation that spiritual actions—from prayer to service to

study of the Revealed Word of God—give us access to sources of power that can effect real change in ourselves and the world. At the same time, it is made equally clear that spiritual power of this kind is not a power to be used *against* others; coercion to advance spiritual ends is not countenanced. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains,

> But in this wondrous Dispensation, the Blessed Beauty hath . . . abrogated contention and conflict, and even rejected undue insistence. He exhorted us instead to "consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship". He ordained that we be loving friends and well-wishers of all peoples and religions, and enjoined upon us to demonstrate the highest virtues in our dealings with the kindreds of the earth. (*Light* 32:2)

The Bahá'í concept of the exercise of power involves *empowerment*—empowering individuals through emphasis on the "twofold moral purpose, to develop their inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society" (Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2010); empowering communities through practices such as consultation to become unified protagonists of their own progress; and empowering institutions through development of a culture of service and empathy, on the one hand, and of equity, justice and trustworthiness, on the other hand. In this context, the

promotion of consultation, and the willingness to view everyone as a potential partner, are both expressions of the new conception of power.

This focus on empowerment, and eschewing coercion, can be seen for example in Bahá'u'lláh's explanation of how to teach, a fundamental spiritual activity for Bahá'ís:

> Should anyone among you be incapable of grasping a certain truth, or be striving to comprehend it, show forth, when conversing with him, a spirit of extreme kindliness and goodwill. Help him to see and recognize the truth, without esteeming yourself to be, in the least, superior to him, or to be possessed of greater endowments. (*Gleanings* 5:3)

If spirituality today looks like developing this new kind of power—empowering ourselves and others—then it equally requires that we avoid becoming entangled in the pursuit of that other kind of power. Thus, spirituality requires that the individual "eschew . . . the contest for worldly power" (Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021). I venture to suggest that we see here a concrete example of the transformation of "satanic strength"—which, given the Bahá'í conception of Satan as "the lower nature in man" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 97:12), might be understood as an individual's (community's or institution's) efforts to advance their own selfish interests, even at the expense of others—into "heavenly

power," a power that is deployed for the betterment of all, that refuses to overbear anyone's freedom of conscience, and is thus truly spiritual.

WORKING TOWARD RECONCILIATION

The cultivation of spirituality in this period of time demands a more active attempt at religious reconciliation—both between religions and between those who are religious and those who have separated themselves from religion. In describing the enkindled souls, the Universal House of Justice notes:

- They see the power that true religion possesses to transform hearts and overcome distrust, and so, with confidence in what the future holds, they labour to cultivate the conditions in which progress can occur;

- They advocate tolerance and understanding, and they strive to foster fellow feeling even among groups who may traditionally have been hostile to one another;

- They are focused on transcending differences and harmonizing perspectives. (30 December 2021)

Just as the principle of the oneness of humanity is "the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve" (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 42), "[d]isunity is the crux of the problems which so severely afflict the

planet" (Universal House of Justice 26 November 1992). Well aware of the pivotal importance of the principle of unity, the Bahá'í community has, over the decades, worked to root out prejudice of all forms within its own ranks. This important work is by no means complete and must continue; it is, however, no longer sufficient.

Religion inherently has the power to tame the passions of disunity, but when religion itself is divided, it loses this power. Religiously motivated animosity and violence, as well as the entanglement of religion with divisive partisan politics, feed polarizations that threaten to tear national communities apart, and thus contribute to a situation in which "the world is becoming increasingly ungovernable" (Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010).

In its letter to religious leaders, the Universal House of Justice, after outlining the salutary effect of the erosion of prejudices that in the past have plagued the world, notes that, regrettably,

[i]n contrast to the processes of unification that are transforming the rest of humanity's social relationships, the suggestion that all of the world's great religions are equally valid in nature and origin is stubbornly resisted by entrenched patterns of sectarian thought. (April 2002)

This is arguably the single greatest obstacle to religion's ability to contribute its vital role to the advancement of civilization.

Spirituality, then, looks like "striv[ing] to foster fellow feeling even among groups who may traditionally have been hostile to one another." Individuals, communities, and institutions can do this work at the neighborhood level—the level at which people interact on a daily basis and live their daily lives—by being "focused on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives," and viewing "everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with" (30 December 2021 ¶ 4).

Today, it is not a sufficient expression of spirituality for the individual or community to transform only itself, striving to hold itself up as a model to be emulated. Spirituality means actively working to bring about reconciliation and transformation of one's neighborhood, and wider society, through the daily activities in which one is engaged.

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I have here looked at only one paragraph of one letter from the Universal House of Justice. Many other such passages could be similarly explored. I believe that the foregoing clearly demonstrates that the ongoing guidance of this supreme institution of the global Bahá'í community is a rich source for understanding what spirituality looks like today, for individuals, communities, and institutions. We can see in the single passage under study elements of a lived spirituality that should be recognizable and laudable both to people from a religious background and to those with no religious background but who are committed to a moral vision for social transformation.

This spirituality looks like the embrace of rationality and the infusion of the collective use of reason, through consultation, into community life. It looks like the adoption of a clear vision of the inherent oneness of humanity, and an understanding that the welfare of each depends on the welfare of all. It looks like the cultivation of the qualities of trustworthiness, cooperation, forbearance, generosity and respect. It looks like the commitment to empowering others rather than trying to gain power over them. And it looks like the resolve to focus on transcending differences and working towards reconciliation.

The harmony of science and religion has always been a core principle of the Bahá'í Faith. Spirituality can demonstrably embrace science. Is the converse true? Can science be similarly receptive to spirituality?

One challenge to such receptivity is that science, as discussed at the outset of the paper, has largely not understood spirituality as an object of study. Religion and spirituality as *social phenomena* have, of course, been studied in the social sciences. But can these sciences go beyond treating spirituality's impact in the world as originating in the subjective belief of individuals and groups, and consider what it might mean for spirituality to have a basis in "objective" ontological reality?[20] It is to this question that I now turn.

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20   For an insightful article on this see Craig, "A Lamp in the Darkness: How Bahá'í Communities Can Uplift Individuals Lost in the Darkness of Trauma."

Science and Human Spiritual Nature

Where science has previously asked what effect humans' spiritual beliefs have—on their individual lives and the wider world—could it turn to the more fundamental question of whether humans have a spiritual nature, an ontological underpinning to their being that bears a truth relationship with (at least some of) their spiritual beliefs?

As a question for science this may seem unanswerable. Science is about things that can be observed and measured because they have a physical ontology, not about things like "spirit" that are supposed to have a (primarily) non-physical, or supra-physical, ontology that our powers of observation and measurement cannot access.

I argue here that spirituality *can* be investigated by science. If we have a clear sense of what spirituality looks like, then we can construct different theories—incorporating contrasting background assumptions about the ontological basis for this spiritual behavior—and generate falsifiable hypotheses that can be evaluated in light of data. To support this claim, I first specify which of the sciences might be able to do this, before turning to the way in which this might be done in spite of the non-physicality of spiritual reality.

The Social Sciences

Different scientific disciplines confine themselves to the investigation of specific categories of phenomena. It is not necessary for the prosecution of physics, for example, to assume that large collections of molecules are able to reach a state of self-organization: that is the province of biology. As a physicist, one can carry on quite well without bothering with that higher level of emergence. Similarly, the natural sciences as a whole—physics, chemistry and biology—can pursue their investigation of the world of nature without assuming the existence of realities beyond the level of the biological animal. The human body, which shares in this animal nature, can be investigated through these sciences, but what we think of as "humanity"—the inner life and social reality of the human being— requires different disciplinary approaches. The very existence of the social sciences, as independent scientific disciplines, attests to the inadequacy of biology to investigate this reality.

If humans do possess a transcendent nature, then, study of this transcendent nature would become the province of the social sciences. Considering the materialist / reductionist paradigm that at present exerts such a strong grip on the evolution of the social sciences, this would initially require *consideration* that humans may have a higher nature. And this consideration, if taken seriously, could find shape in the formulation of testable hypotheses.

Presuppositions and Background Assumptions in Science

Most of us, if asked to describe how science works, might say something

like this: in science we accumulate data, which serves as evidence for or against formulated hypotheses.

A key criterion for a scientific hypothesis, familiar again to many, is that, as proposed originally by the Muslim scholar Ḥasan Ibn Al-Haytham and later the medieval scholar Robert Grosseteste, it must be *falsifiable*—that is, it must be formulated in such a way that one can demonstrate it to be wrong if, indeed, it is.[21]

As philosopher of science Helen Longino points out, what is missing in this picture is the role of background beliefs or assumptions. Background assumptions invariably exist, in all the sciences, and form the link between raw data and what is accepted as evidence.

My argument, then, is that the existence of a transcendent spiritual nature in humans can be taken as a background assumption in the social sciences to produce evidence from data, and that this evidence can be used to support or falsify well-formulated hypotheses about human spiritual nature. Though this may at first glance appear to be a circular argument, it is not, for the reason that hypotheses are always falsifiable. If humans are, as the reductionist paradigm holds, nothing but animals, background assumptions to that effect will produce a better set of hypotheses.

Before providing examples to illustrate the argument, it would be useful to explore the respective roles in the sciences of *presuppositions*

DATA → BACKGROUND ASSUMPTIONS → EVIDENCE → HYPOTHESIS

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21   This has led some to claim that science can never prove anything, but only show things to be false. This notion calls into question the nature of inductive proof, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that this feature of inductive proof gives to scientific truth that curious property of being enduring, on the one hand, and relative, on the other hand. Some scientific theories are later shown to be completely incorrect—as was the case with the caloric theory of heat and the phlogiston theory of combustion—while others are shown to be approximations of a more sophisticated and encompassing theory—as is the case with Newtonian mechanics and gravitation, or with equilibrium thermodynamics which, in the twentieth century, gave way to a wider theory of nonequilibrium thermodynamics.

and *background assumptions*—two very different things, but both inescapable—from the perspective of the philosophy of science. Hugh Gauch presents a model of science as based on evidence, logic, and a small set of presuppositions without which "evidence loses its evidential role" (*Practice* 112). The role of these presuppositions is perhaps the aspect of science that is least understood and least appreciated (*Practice* ch. 4; *Brief* ch. 5).

Essentially, a presupposition is a belief that is required to reach a particular conclusion, and yet it cannot possibly be proved. A presupposition cannot be proved in the ordinary sense of marshalling

definitive evidence because presuppositions precede and empower evidence. But that does not necessarily mean that presuppositions are arbitrary and shaky. Rather, presuppositions should be chosen carefully, disclosed, and then legitimated. Because presuppositions are just as necessary as evidence for science to reach any conclusions, a reflective account of science must discuss them. (*Brief* 73**)**

Gauch cites Caldin's useful summation of the role of presuppositions: "Most scientists take for granted their metaphysical assumptions, but they are nonetheless necessary logically to the conclusions of science" (*Brief* 73).

So what are these presuppositions of science? As put forward by Thomas Reid and the Scottish School of Common Sense, they are the same as the presuppositions behind "common sense," which hinge on the idea that our senses (and the instruments that extend them), in aggregate, reveal to us true information about the real world (Gauch, *Practice* 64-65, 120–23). Furthermore, the truths and secrets of nature are susceptible to being understood through rational enquiry and the exercise of the human intellect. While these presuppositions may seem obvious, in the history of philosophy they have been denied by skeptics, most notably Pyrrho of Elis, Sextus Empiricus, David Hume, and some of the postmodernists (*Practice* chs. 2, 4; *Brief* chs. 3, 5).[22]

Whereas this small set of presuppositions is necessarily shared by all scientists as the basis for scientific activity to have any meaning, background assumptions, in contrast, are not universal and to some extent are culture-dependent. Background assumptions, as stated above, are inescapable in science, linking data to evidence as they do. Crucially, the same set of data interpreted on the basis of different background assumptions can lead to different evidentiary conclusions.[23]

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22   The Bahá'í writings, on the other hand, fully support the validity of these presuppositions. 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms the reality of the world we experience: "The sophists hold that all existence is illusory. . . . This notion is false, for although the existence of things is an illusion compared to the existence of God, yet in the contingent world it is established, proven, and undeniable" (*Some Answered Questions* 79:1). Bahá'u'lláh further confirms that this world can be meaningfully apprehended by human senses and understood by the human mind: "Look at the world and ponder a while upon it. It unveileth the book of its own self before thine eyes and revealeth that which the Pen of thy Lord, the Fashioner, the All-Informed, hath inscribed therein. It will acquaint thee with that which is within it and upon it and will give thee such clear explanations as to make thee independent of every eloquent expounder" (*Tablets* 9:13).

23   Data is the raw material out of which evidence is constructed. Evidence, in turn, is used to support or refute mental constructs, conjectures, hypotheses, and ultimately laws or theories: in short, to create scientific truth. It is in the process of interpreting data—of using it to generate

In *Science As Social Knowledge* Helen Longino gives a number of examples of this.[24] Longino argues, however, that background assumptions do not undermine objectivity in science; it is preserved, through a process of *transformative criticism* or *transformative interrogation,* within a scientific community (63–82). In transformative interrogation, background assumptions are aired and examined, alternative ways of looking at the data (i.e. through different background assumptions) are explored and, ultimately, consensus may be obtained. Naomi Oreskes, in

support of Longino, notes that the objectivity of science rests on the ability of the scientific community of experts to identify the operating background assumptions and to evaluate them, as well as on its ability to assess the links between evidence and theory (25–143).[25]

Intelligible Realities in Science

One more feature of science needs to be mentioned: the accumulation of data (things measurable) and the study of patterns and consistencies in that data lead science to usefully hypothesize the existence of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls "intelligible" or intellectual realities (*Some Answered Questions* 16), or what a physicist might call mathematical realities: ontologically real phenomena that cannot be directly observed (they are not "sensible," as 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts it).

For example, because a vast range of phenomena can be understood if we hypothesize that *fields* exist—such as the Higgs field referred to above, or the electron field—we infer that fields exist. Yet the field cannot be directly observed; only the particle that instantiates it can be. These entities, which have a precise mathematical formulation, are considered in the physical

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evidence—that background assumptions play a role.

24   One example she gives is an experiment performed by Priestey and repeated by Lavoisier. Both performed the same experiment and obtained the same data, but each had a different background assumption. Priestley believed in the phlogiston theory which held that combustion resulted from the release of a combustible substance (phlogiston) from the burning matter into the air. Lavoisier believed that combustion was due to combination of the combusting substance with a substance in the air (what is now known as the Oxygen theory). Each scientist saw the data as evidence for his own hypothesis about combustion. Longino writes,

The two thus had the same experimental information but approached it with different background beliefs. . . . In the context of their differing background beliefs and assumptions different aspects of the same state of affairs became evidentially significant. (47–48)

25   For a deeper analysis of transformative interrogation and a proposed extension to transformative dialogue, see Neyman and Wenninger. For further discussion of the role of diversity in science, and truth-seeking more generally, from a Bahá'í perspective, see Friberg, Smith, and Espinosa.

sciences to be *real,* and are *physical.* Although "non-sensible" they are, nevertheless, entities that inhabit the *physical* universe in which we live.

In the sense that the Bahá'í writings conceive it—as a transcendent intellectual power and, beyond that, as a transcendent divine power, both of which the human possesses but the animal lacks—spirituality is an intelligible, and not a sensible, reality. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, while 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms that intelligible realities include some physical realities (*Some Answered Questions* 48), we can presume that the human (and higher) spirits are not physical.

Spirituality as a Background Assumption in the Social Sciences

So far, then, we have seen that scientists interpret data through background assumptions, and that science can hypothesize the existence of intelligible realities that cannot be directly observed or measured. What would it then look like for the social sciences to treat spirituality as a background assumption?

Successful scientific theories—those that, amongst other things, incorporate effective background assumptions—have two features:

1. Explanatory power (and dramatically, sometimes, the ability to explain bodies of data that in the absence of the theory would appear to be disconnected);
2. Predictive power.

If spirituality were adopted as a background assumption in the social sciences, the evidence that would then emerge out of the data could be evaluated according to these two features, to see if the assumption has traction.[26] Does a theory, incorporating the background assumption of the reality of spirituality, not only *explain* the evidence, but also have the power of *prediction*? And just as importantly, can such a theory be used to develop technologies—social technologies, such as pedagogies, or therapeutic technologies[27] —that, when applied, help to propel society forward?

To see how this might work, we can consider two rival theories, one that takes spirituality as a background assumption, and the other that assumes (in line with the prevailing, if often implicit, scientific paradigm) that the human is simply an animal, with no spiritual nature.

Turning first to explanatory power, we must acknowledge that certain kinds of data that we might initially think support the former theory are potentially equally well explained by

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26   As noted above, data can be analyzed through several lenses, each representing a different set of background assumptions. Undoubtedly, over time, a single, perhaps broad, set of background assumptions—even a worldview—will emerge with the potential to become a new paradigm.

27   For example, forms of psychoanalysis that account for the existence of the human being's spiritual reality. See John S. Hatcher.

the latter. Animal emotion and be-havior, the current paradigm runs, are emergent properties arising from the physical world and are intimately tied with self-interest, whether that interest be of the organism itself or of its genetic line. Animals can sacri-fice themselves in order to reproduce; they can sacrifice themselves for their young; they can sacrifice for the hive, the family, the herd, the pride. In some circles the case has been made that they sacrifice themselves so that their genes survive—what George Wald has called "vicarious selection" (61). Thus, the fact that a human parent sacrific-es her life for her child, for example, does not necessarily support the "spir-ituality" theory more strongly than its alternative.

Data could, however, be generated showing that humans have the ability to acquire loyalty to abstract entities far above any level of self-interest or "gene-interest" and to sacrifice for such abstract concepts as truth, love, justice, humanity, and the sacred. Humans have the capacity to treat all fellow humans with kindness and love, no matter how they are treated in re-turn; to consider all life itself as some-thing sacred. They have the power to conceptualize a world far above the world of the senses and to gain deep reverence for that world. One of the distinguishing characteristics of human societies, according to the anthropolo-gist, is not so much that they are great at surviving (which they are, of course), but that being to a great extent masters of their environment, their seeking

after *meaning*, which transcends pure survival, assumes central importance. One would not say this about animal groups, except to the extent that the human observer might ascribe "mean-ing" to them. The question then be-comes which theory—the one that incorporates a background assumption of spiritual reality, or its lack—better explains this data. Are these unique human traits truly transcendent, or are they merely extensions of animal emo-tion and behavior?

Here it may seem that the spirituality theory is better supported: the human is exhibiting intellectual and emotional capacities that categorically transcend the animal.[28] That is certainly the inter-pretation confirmed in the Bahá'í writ-ings, as when 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes that "the animal perceives sensible things but cannot perceive conceptual reali-ties" (*Some Answered Questions* 48:6), giving as an example the ability of the earth-bound human to extrapolate from observation the non-observable fact that the earth is spherical (48:6–7).

However, even a scientist who agrees that this is a difference in kind,

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28   Note that, given the current re-ductionist / materialist paradigm that rules both the physical and the social sciences, we can expect even this statement to be controversial. There would thus be great value in research aimed at openly consider-ing this question—asking whether human intellect, capacities, societies, and civiliza-tion differ from their animal counterparts in degree or in kind. For a recent survey of this question from a Bahá'í perspective, see Filson.

and not in degree, between the human and the animal might challenge 'Abdu'l-Bahá's conclusion that "man is endowed with a power of discovery that distinguishes him from the animal, *and this power is none but the human spirit*" (*Some Answered Questions* 48:7, emphasis added). In terms of the inherent and the emergent, the scientist could argue that animal intellect and emotion are emergent phenomena arising out of collections of extremely large numbers of elements that interact in very complex ways. When the elements decompose, the animal, and the qualities it manifests, disappears. He might say that the same is true with regard to the human, regarding the human mind as simply a higher order of emergent phenomenon transcending animal intelligence.[29]

It might seem that we are at an impasse between the view of unique human attributes as emergent physical phenomena and, say, the Bahá'í view that the human soul is a single, non-physical entity, and that the powers of the intellect and of the divine in the individual are, therefore, inherent rather than emergent. How could the social sciences decide between these paradigms while remaining sciences, that is, employing methods that put them firmly in the camp of science rather than

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29   Terrence Deacon takes this stance. "Biologically we are just another ape; mentally we are a whole new phylum of organism" (Goodenough and Deacon 862). Deacon, who calls himself "a religious non-theist" (865), takes a strict emergentist view of this phenomenon.

sliding into metaphysics? To answer this, we can turn to the second feature of successful scientific theories—their predictive power, including the power to generate new technologies.

As an example of such a hypothetical technology, consider this statement of Bahá'u'lláh:

> In the treasuries of the knowledge of God there lieth concealed a knowledge which, when applied, will largely, though not wholly, eliminate fear. This knowledge, however, should be taught from childhood, as it will greatly aid in its elimination. Whatever decreaseth fear increaseth courage. (*Epistle* 32)

This would, on its face, appear to be a knowledge that could be discovered by science and applied as a technology of that science. Baha'u'llah's *prediction* regarding this knowledge and its future discovery would contribute towards proof—scientific proof—of the truth of the background assumption that man is a spiritual being. With the development of more technologies, based on the predictive power of the theory that human beings have a transcendent spiritual nature, the background assumption that man has such a spiritual nature would evolve into a new paradigm.

TESTING THE
BACKGROUND ASSUMPTION

While it would take time, and the accumulation of a robust body of research,

to effect this paradigm shift, we can look to a couple of available examples of the kind of scientific investigations that could contribute to this.

In 2018, *Science* published a lengthy article on resilience. One of its sections presents a trio of studies that merged in Katrina@10, a long-term study looking at resilience in people who lost their homes in New Orleans because of Hurricane Katrina. The goal of the study is ambitious: "to build a crystal ball that uses a few characteristics to predict disaster recovery in the long term," with one possible result being to "help policymakers and disaster recovery programs pick out especially vulnerable groups" and "even steer them toward interventions that do the most good"—i.e. to develop a technology to increase resilience (Servick).

The study found that among the pre-storm predictors of resilience, "psychological strength"—which included religiosity and perceived ability to respond to stressors—was the primary factor, with household income over $20,000 a close second. In general religiosity was a factor in recovery, both among communities who returned to their old homes and rebuilt, and among those who rebuilt their lives elsewhere. One survivor in particular, who seemed to have built a better life than the one she had before the hurricane, reported that she had "developed a deeper relationship with God." One group, an immigrant Vietnamese community that showed great resilience, returned almost immediately and began to rebuild. They started by rebuilding their church, and only then began working together to rebuild their houses.

A number of factors were identified as having a negative effect on recovery, among them the amount of time spent in shelters. Being older than fifty or disabled were also strong negative indicators. But in the case of the Vietnamese community, internal cohesion coupled with their religiosity helped motivate them to return to their old homes quickly, reducing the negative effect of spending a long period of time in shelters. Presumably, this same internal cohesion—which one might say was closely tied to the community's religiosity—also mitigated against the negative factors of age and disability. In general, as one might expect, it was a combination of inner and outer factors that contributed to, or detracted from, the ability to recover.

Given this kind of data, showing that religious affiliation was a cause of greater resilience,[30] it would be possible for social science researchers to formulate theories, and hypotheses, that take spiritual reality as a background assumption, and then to evaluate their predictive power.

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30   Note that within a materialistic paradigm one could argue that religious belief or affiliation may be correlated with resilience but is not its cause; that some other factor drives both religiosity and resilience for instance. A good research design would be able to evaluate this possibility; I assume for the purposes of this discussion a data set that shows that religious affiliation was in fact causally connected to resilience.

One could, for example, adopt as a background assumption that humans are spiritual beings, in the sense that (a) we have a transcendent intellect, and (b) we can acquire divine attributes. This could be accompanied by the background assumptions that religion, to the degree that it has remained faithful to the unifying principles of its foundational scriptures, meaningfully reflects and nurtures the divine attributes humans possess, and in so doing contributes to resilience.[31]

One could simultaneously generate theories and hypotheses consistent with a materialist set of background assumptions. These theories could acknowledge that religion is a cause of resilience, but not conclude that religion's beliefs are true. Here the background assumptions could include the following:

1. Human beings have evolved in certain ways due to the beliefs and practices of religion—that is, religion itself has evolved as a beneficial adaptation in humans, and

2. Human beings have been made to benefit from religion *purely through the operation of natural selection*, not through the action of a Creator or through interaction with an underlying spiritual reality.

This is a stance often taken within evolutionary psychology, "a theory about the origins of the human mind. It assumes that all human behavior, like that of animals, is directed towards competitive advantage in the evolutionary struggle of life." Within this paradigm, religion can be evolutionarily adaptive without being accurate in its description of reality:

> Sociobiologist E.O. Wilson sees religious belief in particular as providing a sense of 'sacredness' on which principles of social co-operation can be firmly constructed. . . . Yet Wilson is not arguing for the reality of religious belief as some kind of transcendent truth, only the utility of the belief in benefiting the individual and sustaining social unity. Indeed, Wilson claims that morality has no other demonstrable function than to keep human genetic material intact. (Hurlbut 874)

Here we see the operation of Longino's model. The data is filtered through a particular background

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31   These background assumptions are made explicit in the Bahá'í writings and guidance. For instance, the Universal House of Justice writes that

> [r]eligion, as we are all aware, reaches to the roots of motivation. When it has been faithful to the spirit and example of the transcendent Figures who gave the world its great belief systems, it has awakened in whole populations capacities to love, to forgive, to create, to dare greatly, to overcome prejudice, to sacrifice for the common good and to discipline the impulses of animal instinct. (April 2002)

assumption to create evidence—in this case, evidence for the validity of the idea that man is an animal, and all human behavior is rooted in the evolutionary struggle for survival. The hypotheses formulated from the evidence arising from data as filtered through this particular background assumption have some degree of *explanatory* power, just as hypotheses formulated based on a background assumption of spiritual reality have explanatory power. But do they have *predictive* power?

One of the "overriding principles of nature" governing "all population behavior," as noted by physicist Marvin Chester, is that "the effect on the environment of a population's success is to alter that environment in a way that opposes the success" (*Populations* 1). The developing climate crisis, which threatens human civilization, can be seen as a dramatic illustration of this "overriding principle." The hypotheses of evolutionary psychology would predict, if anything, that our civilization, which has carried our (animal) species to an unprecedented and "unnatural" state of success, will suffer collapse. The human race, greatly reduced in numbers, may revert to a tribal stage, with religion (which helped bring about this crisis) most likely returning to those forms that served the interests of tribal society so well in the past. Conversely, if our civilization survives, it will be through the (unpredictable) emergence of new capabilities that are not connected to the religious beliefs that helped us in our evolutionary past. Specifically, beliefs that there is a God

and that man has a transcendent reality should be superfluous to our survival. Evolution occurs in response to immediate conditions; it has no ability to see into, or to prepare for, the future. It would be an extraordinary coincidence if something necessary for our past evolution were to prove to be a significant factor in helping us advance into a new state, or society, totally different from the one we came out of. If this did in fact prove to be the case, it would support the non-materialist paradigm, in which the existence of spiritual reality, and religion's capacity to meaningfully generate knowledge about that reality, are background assumptions.

Indeed, such an outcome would seem to validate the vision for humanity's future contained in the Bahá'í writings. Bahá'u'lláh predicts emphatically: "These fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the 'Most Great Peace' shall come" (qtd. in *God Passes By* 194)—a Peace established "by the direct operation of the laws and principles revealed by Bahá'u'lláh" (from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi qtd. in *Peace* 64). Further, the arrival of this "Great Peace . . . for which from age to age the sacred scriptures of mankind have constantly held the promise" would validate the predictive power of religion itself (*Promise of World Peace* 1).

So here we have two clearly different sets of predictions, stemming from theories incorporating different background assumptions. On the one hand, the prediction that if humanity is to resolve the crises currently facing

it, then religion—having arisen as an evolutionarily selected response to conditions in our distant past—will have little role to play. On the other hand, the prediction that only with religion—specifically the *eternal principles of religion*, and full embrace of the *reality* of the divine—can humanity bring civilization back into moderation. To say that only with religion can we do this is not to say that religion *alone* can do it—it must be religion in harmony with science. The fruit of this happy union will be an ever-advancing civilization characterized by both material and spiritual prosperity. This, then, is the *prediction* we can make from hypotheses derived from evidence arrived at by filtering the data through the background assumption that God, and hence spirituality, is *real* and that the essential purpose of life is not to propagate one's genes, but to develop one's spiritual capacities, and, in so doing, contribute to an "ever-advancing civilization."

While it would be foolhardy for proponents of either theory to claim, at this early stage and with humanity's future path seemingly still in question, that the evidence conclusively proves them right, there are emerging examples we can look at as support for the prediction that religion can act as a remedy for the crises facing our societies—that it can, for instance, contribute to a community's resilience in the face of these crises, and empower it to contribute to the advancement of civilization at the local or national level.

One of the most remarkable stories of resilience in the modern period is the development of the Bahá'í community in Iran, both materially and spiritually, despite severe clerical and governmental opposition since the birth of the Bahá'í Faith in the mid-nineteenth century. The document *Century of Light* notes that the immediate agent of this transformation in the early twentieth century was none other than 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Though confined to 'Akka and physically distant from the Persian Bahá'í community, He sent "a flood of Tablets" (letters) through which "the Persian believers were revived and heartened." These communications "provided not only the spiritual sustenance they needed, but leadership in finding their way through the turmoil that was undermining the established order of things in their land." These letters, "reaching even the smallest villages across the country, responded to the appeals and questions of countless individual believers, bringing guidance, encouragement and assurance" (8). *Century of Light* concludes this section with this observation:

> Social historians of the future, with a perspective far more dispassionate and universal than is presently possible, and benefiting from unimpeded access to all of the primary documentation, will study minutely the transformation that the Master ['Abdu'l-Bahá] achieved in these early years. Day after day, month after month, from a distant exile where He was endlessly harried by the host of enemies surrounding Him, 'Abdu'l-Bahá

was able not only to stimulate the expansion of the Persian Bahá'í community, but to shape its consciousness and collective life. The result was the emergence of a culture, however localized, that was unlike anything humanity had ever known. Our century, with all its upheavals and its grandiloquent claims to create a new order, has no comparable example of the systematic application of the powers of a single Mind to the building of a distinctive and successful community that saw its ultimate sphere of work as the globe itself. (10)

There are similarly a number of remarkable instances of resilience within the global Bahá'í community in the postwar period that have yet to be fully studied. The Bahá'í community of Iran after the Islamic Revolution provides one outstanding example. A steady stream of letters from the Universal House of Justice has helped sustain that beleaguered community against the onslaught of a vicious foe determined to exterminate it. *Century of Light* notes that early on, after the Islamic Revolution, it was the Bahá'ís, rather than their oppressors, who "quickly set the terms of the encounter" (119).

Against the backdrop of dramatic struggles for social change in the twentieth century, characterized by non-violent opposition and civil disobedience, the Bahá'í community of Iran has pursued a distinctively non-adversarial approach to social change under conditions of violent oppression. (Karlberg, "Constructive Resilience" 1)

In the face of the fiercest opposition they have steadfastly kept to their fundamental principles by maintaining the integrity of their faith and beliefs, on the one hand, and continuing to strive, as much as was in their power, to work for the welfare of their nation and their fellow-citizens, on the other hand. The community's capacity to achieve these things in the face of such circumstances supports the argument that their religious faith and teachings, far from merely providing some general sense of social cohesion within the community, allow them to work in ways that reflect *real* spiritual dynamics, and to access *real* spiritual power. Recent scholarship using the lens of "constructive resilience" to study the response of the Iranian Bahá'í community to oppression points the way to productive future research.[32]

What about Bahá'í communities elsewhere? One story that remains to be told in detail is that of the Bahá'í community of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a country that has seen abusive totalitarian government, civil war, corruption, serious human rights violations, and deep divisions due to ethnic hostilities, for virtually its entire existence since obtaining

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32   See, for example, Michael Karlberg's articles "Constructive Resilience: The Bahá'í Response to Oppression" and "The Constructive Imaginary."

independence in 1965. Against this backdrop, the Bahá'í community in the DRC has emerged, grown, and flourished, showing not only remarkable resilience but also a remarkable internal cohesion and outwardly-focused spirit of tolerance and inclusiveness that stand in stark contrast to the problems facing the nation to which it belongs. The Bahá'í community of the DRC has, in fact, risen to become one of the foremost Bahá'í communities in the world. Critical to its success has been the continual guidance Bahá'ís in general, and the Congolese Bahá'í community in particular, has received from the Universal House of Justice, directing them always to be cognizant of their spiritual capacities and diligent in their continued cultivation of those qualities.

A recent letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the DRC acknowledges that "alas, your nation has time and again suffered from conflict among some of its peoples… [Y]ou are, of course, not immune to the forces that generate and drive conflict," a state of affairs that demands "vigilance by all the believers in ensuring that divisions, especially those related to ethnicity, do not take root in your community." The letter goes on to say,

> The mission of the Bahá'ís is to learn to apply the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh in their individual and collective lives and in the life of their society. Through well-ordered efforts and in collaboration with many others who are dedicated to bettering the world, Bahá'ís bring the principles suited to humanity's age of maturity to bear on the conditions of the world's peoples. They strive for the transformation of the inner and outer realities of human life, and for the cultivation of spiritual and social conditions that will give rise to a new kind of people and a new society founded on unity. . . . (1 November 2022)

It is a testament to the Congolese Bahá'í community's success in living up to this mandate—to demonstrating in practice "what spirituality looks like"—that their country was chosen as the site of the first national House of Worship in the Bahá'í world, completed in 2023 (*Bahá'í News*).

In these two brief examples—that of Iran and of the DRC—we see both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Universal House of Justice basing their appeals to the community on an unshakeable belief that humans are spiritual beings and have the capacity, no matter what their external circumstances, to develop their spiritual qualities. If humanity did not have this capacity, then messages such as those above could have only a very limited effect, at best. Clearly these are capacities that, if they do indeed exist in humanity, can be discovered and studied by the sciences, and systematically developed through technologies arising from those discoveries.

In summary, scientific truth is both *explanatory* and *predictive*. Let us,

for the moment, adopt a background assumption that man has a spiritual nature. Filtering the data concerning the rise and resilience of the Bahá'í communities of Iran and the Congo through that background assumption, one obtains *explanatory* evidence supporting a hypothesis that humans have a spiritual nature as outlined in the Bahá'í writings. That hypothesis also allows us to *predict* that once the Bahá'í community of Iran is freed from the egregious restrictions placed on it by Iran's current government, the Bahá'í community will, in the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "contribute in making of the land of Iran the envy and admiration of the peoples and nations of the world" (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 173). Similarly, we can *predict* that the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo will be able to overcome the "divisions related to ethnicity" that so severely afflict their country, with the Bahá'í community becoming a model and playing a significant role in helping its nation overcome these divisions. Here, then, we have both explanation and prediction that, in concert, can provide proof of the hypothesis.

Conclusion

In this paper I have examined some of the features and characteristics of spirituality, and have presented, by examining a particular passage from a recent letter of the Universal House of Justice, an overview of what spirituality would look like at this point in

human history. In the evolution of its conceptual understanding and of its expression of spirituality at the levels of the individual, the community and the institutions, the worldwide Bahá'í community is blessed by the ongoing program of learning of the International Teaching Centre and the constant stream of guidance coming from its supreme governing institution, the Universal House of Justice. Indeed, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith wrote in the 1930s that

> the machinery of the Cause has been so fashioned, that whatever is deemed necessary to incorporate into it in order to keep it in the forefront of all progressive movements, can, according to the provisions made by Bahá'u'lláh, be safely embodied therein. (*World Order* 22–23)

Finally, I have presented an argument that human spirituality can be investigated by science—specifically the social sciences—by examining data in light of the background assumption that man is a spiritual being, and from the evidence derived from filtering data through that background assumption, forming testable hypotheses.

Over the next twenty-five years the Bahá'í worldwide community will be focusing on "the release of the society-building powers of the Faith in ever-greater measures" (Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021 ¶ 3). As Bahá'u'lláh declared to British orientalist E.G. Browne, "*We desire but the*

good of the world and the happiness of the nations (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 37). This good and this happiness are the aim and focus of spirituality at this time in history.

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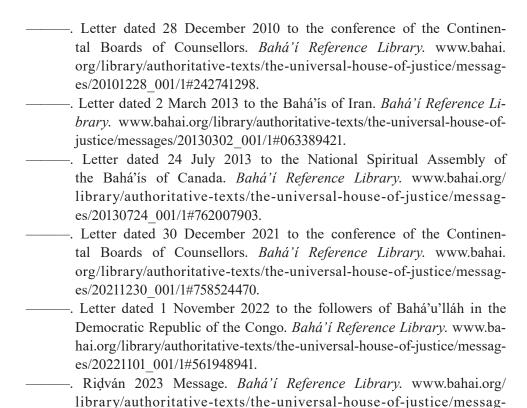Friberg, Stephen. "Revelation as Scientific in its Method: Science, Diversity, Consultation, and

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