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*Bahá'í*  
EPISTEMOLOGY

*Essays and Commentaries*

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**STUDIES IN  
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*Essays and Commentaries*

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BAHÁ'Í EPISTEMOLOGY**

*Essays and Commentaries*

*Edited by Mikhail Sergeev*



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## STUDIES IN BAHÁ'Í EPISTEMOLOGY

*Essays and Commentaries*

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## Epistemological Studies From A Bahá'í Perspective

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Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that explores the ways humans acquire knowledge. It is one of the four classical philosophical disciplines along with metaphysics, ethics, and logic.

There are five types of human cognition — sense perception, reason, tradition, intuition, and revelation. Based on the hierarchical priority philosophical systems ascribe to each kind of knowledge, they are classified as empirical (John Locke), rationalist (René Descartes), traditionalist (Confucius), intuitivist (Henri Bergson), and scriptural (St. Thomas Aquinas).

In Modern times and, more specifically, since the appearance in 1781 of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, epistemological issues acquired a special significance in philosophical studies. With the rise of Biblical criticism, Christian scriptural philosophy had lost its momentum, and nineteenth and twentieth-century thinkers focused on sense perception and reason as the two primary sources of human cognition.

A recently conceived and developed religious movement, the Bahá'í faith reintroduces the scriptural mode of thinking into philosophical inquiries. Its scriptural texts are well preserved and authenticated. Many of the writings by the founding figures of the faith explicitly address critical philosophical problems. They also employ the Aristotelian technical vocabulary with occasional addition of neo-Platonic terms.



In the West, epistemological studies from a Bahá'í perspective started in 1978 with the publication of Jack McLean's essay "The Knowledge of God: An Essay on Bahá'í Epistemology." Since then, Bahá'í thinkers have addressed different aspects of epistemological research. They discussed the independent search for truth, the standards of knowledge, the problems of certainty and relativity, infallibility, and interpretation, as well as mystical experience.<sup>1</sup> All those topics are explored in-depth in corresponding chapters of the book.

Three chapters of the volume — by Peter Terry, Jean-Marc Lepain, and Jack McLean — contain previously unpublished material. A compilation by Peter Terry and a Tractatus by Jean-Marc Lepain have appeared in their earlier versions in the Bahá'í Library Online. Both texts have been revised, enlarged, and edited for publication in their updated form in the book. A paper by Jack McLean is a revised and expanded edition of his article "Correlating Mystical Experience to the Knowledge of God," whose earlier version could be found at his website [www.jack-mclean.com](http://www.jack-mclean.com). Four other essays — by the late William Hatcher, Julio Savi, Todd Smith and Michael Karlberg, and the author of these remarks — have been previously published in Bahá'í journals and are reprinted.

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<sup>1</sup> See a chronology of articles and books on epistemological issues from a Bahá'í perspective at the end of the book.

## INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

### Reflections on the Epistemological Views of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá<sup>1</sup>

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*“Whatever the intelligence of man cannot  
understand, religion ought not to accept.”*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

### PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

It has been traditional in modern philosophy to begin the exposition of any philosophical system with a thinker’s view on epistemological issues. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the son of Bahá’u’lláh, the Prophet and founder of the Bahá’í Faith, and the leader of the Bahá’í Faith after the death of His father, was not a systematic philosopher and did not write a treatise on the theory of knowledge. However, He touches upon epistemological problems in the context of various religious and philosophical topics He discusses in many of His talks and books. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá dwells upon epistemological themes in several chapters of *Some Answered Questions* (1904–06), as well as in the *Tablets of Divine Plan* (1916–17) and the “Tablet to Dr. Auguste Henri Forel” (1921). He also makes important remarks with regard to the theory of

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<sup>1</sup> This article has been previously published in Bahá’í journals and is reprinted with permission. The quotations from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *Some Answered Questions* are revised for this volume, reflecting the latest 2014 translation.

knowledge in a series of presentations on the Bahá'í teachings delivered in Europe and North America and subsequently recorded in *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London and Paris Talks*, as well as in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*.

The aim of this paper is to present a systematic reconstruction of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's epistemological views that are scattered throughout many of His writings and utterances.

## TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE

Generally speaking, 'Abdu'l-Bahá distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge — subjective and objective: “existential knowledge and formal knowledge, that is, intuitive knowledge and conceptual knowledge.” (*Some Answered Questions* (SAQ) 40).<sup>2</sup> He continues:

The knowledge that people generally have of things consists in conceptualization and observation; that is, either the object is conceived through the rational faculty, or through its observation a form is produced in the mirror of the heart. The scope of this knowledge is quite limited, as it is conditioned upon acquisition and attainment.

The other kind of knowledge, however, which is existential or intuitive knowledge, is like man's knowledge and awareness of his own self (40).

Reflecting on various aspects of inner or intuitive knowledge, 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out that human insight comes to fruition in the course of meditation, which “is the key for opening the doors

<sup>2</sup> Later on page 61 'Abdu'l-Bahá reinforces the same point: “Know that the influence and perception of the human spirit is of two kinds; that is, the human spirit has two modes of operation and understanding. One mode is through the mediation of bodily instruments and organs. Thus, it sees with the eye, hears with the ear, speaks with the tongue. These are actions of the spirit and operations of the human reality, but they occur through the mediation of bodily instruments...The other mode of the spirit's influence and action is without these bodily instruments and organs.”

of mysteries. In that state man abstracts himself: in that state man withdraws himself from all outside objects; in that subjective mood he is immersed in the ocean of spiritual life and can unfold the secrets of things-in-themselves” (*Paris Talks* 175). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá continues:

Through the faculty of meditation man. . . receives the breath of the Holy Spirit—the bestowal of the Spirit is given in reflection and meditation. Through it he receives Divine inspiration, through it he receives heavenly food. This faculty brings forth from the invisible plane the sciences and arts. Through the meditative faculty inventions are made possible, colossal undertakings are carried out; through it governments can run smoothly. Through this faculty man enters into the very Kingdom of God” (175).

The intuitive power of the human spirit can manifest itself in a wakeful state as well as during sleep by means of dreams and visions.

“How often it happens,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá points out, “that the spirit has a dream in the realm of sleep whose purport comes to be exactly materialized two years hence! Likewise, how often it happens that in the world of dreams the spirit solves a problem that it could not solve in the realm of wakefulness.” (SAQ 61).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also argues that our intuitive abilities allow us to communicate with departed souls. “A conversation can be held, but not as our [physical] conversation. The heart of man is open to inspiration; this is spiritual communication. As in a dream one talks with a friend while the mouth is silent, so is it in the conversation of the spirit” (*Paris Talks* 179).

The highest form of human intuition is revelation, which is available only to specific human beings who are the “Manifestations of God,” the founders of major religions. These Divine Manifestations share with other humans the sensory and rational

capacity for knowledge, but in addition they possess intuitive or heavenly comprehension that “encompasses, knows, and comprehends all things; is aware of the divine mysteries, truths, and inner meanings; and discovers the hidden verities of the Kingdom” (SAQ 58). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains the source of intuitive understanding as follows:

This is an existential knowledge through which man realizes his own condition. He both senses and comprehends it, for the spirit encompasses the body and is aware of its sensations and powers. This knowledge is not the result of effort and acquisition: It is an existential matter; it is pure bounty.

Since those sanctified realities, the universal Manifestations of God, encompass all created things both in their essence and in their attributes, since They transcend and discover all existing realities, and since They are cognizant of all things, it follows that Their knowledge is divine and not acquired — that is, it is a heavenly grace and a divine discovery (40).

Divine Manifestations are capable of spiritual visions and encounters such as the one witnessed by the disciples of Jesus Christ and described in the Bible as the transfiguration.<sup>3</sup> The Manifestations are the only source of the knowledge of God, His will, and His attributes, and Their Word is authoritative and binding for the community of believers.

## REASON VERSUS SENSORY PERCEPTION

Among the three main sources of knowledge — sensory perception, abstract reasoning, and intuition — the latter is always individuated, that is, peculiar to the person who experiences it. We do not

<sup>3</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá discusses in this context the event of the transfiguration in *Some Answered Questions* (71). He also describes the transfiguration as “a spiritual vision and a scene of the Kingdom” (*Selections* 162).

share our intuitions in common with other people, and, therefore, we cannot claim them to be generally valid. Sense perception and rationality, on the other hand, both refer to the objective world of nature and by virtue of that have a universal character. However, while the senses provide us with perception of objects, rational analysis produces abstractions and generalities. Hence, reasoning appears to be the most universal among various forms of human cognition both in its sources and outcomes.

The philosophical movement known as positivism that arose in Europe around the mid-nineteenth century challenged traditional attitudes toward human rationality. The French philosopher, sociologist, and founder of positivism Auguste Comte (1787–1857) stressed the importance of knowledge that is gained through the five senses on the basis that observation and experimentation, which constitute the foundation of science, are impossible without empirical data. In His writings and talks 'Abdu'l-Bahá criticizes such an approach as inconsistent with empirical evidence itself.<sup>4</sup> He says in this respect, for example:

“Modern philosophers say: ‘Nowhere do we see a spirit in man, and, although we have investigated the inmost recesses of the human body, nowhere do we perceive a spiritual power. How then are we to imagine a power which is not sensible?’” (SAQ 48).

He replies to this question:

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<sup>4</sup> Speaking about positivists, whom He simply calls materialists, 'Abdu'l-Bahá displays an unusual and, rare for Him, sense of sarcasm: “One of the strongest things witnessed is that the materialists of today are proud of their natural instincts and bondage. They state that nothing is entitled to belief and acceptance except that which is sensible or tangible. By their own statements they are captives of nature, unconscious of the spiritual world, uninformed of the divine Kingdom and unaware of heavenly bestowals. If this be a virtue, the animal has attained it to a superlative degree for the animal is absolutely ignorant of the realm of spirit and out of touch with the inner world of conscious realization. The animal would agree with the materialist in denying the existence of that which transcends the senses” (*Foundations of World Unity* 69; *Promulgation* 177).

“If we were to deny all that is not accessible to the senses, then we would be forced to deny realities which undoubtedly exist. For example, the ether is not sensible, although its reality can be proven. The power of gravity is not sensible, although its existence is likewise undeniable. Whence do we affirm their existence? From their signs” (48).<sup>5</sup>

It is well known that animals possess sensory perception that is often sharper and more powerful than that of humans. However, they lack the faculty of reason, and this makes animals subject to nature and inferior to man. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

“God’s greatest gift to man is that of intellect, or understanding. All creation, preceding Man, is bound by the stern law of nature. Man alone has freedom, and, by his understanding or intellect, has been able to gain control of and adapt some of those natural laws to his own needs” (*Paris Talks* 41–42).

The materialist position, on the contrary, assigns to human intellect a place within the natural order as its product and an inalienable part of it. While capable of rational inquiry, human reason, as materialists contend, can never penetrate the essence of nature, or understand all of creation, which is the sign of its inferiority to the world of nature. Furthermore, as materialists argue, human intellect is a physical endowment, very much like that of

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<sup>5</sup> In this article we confine our analysis to epistemological and not ontological issues. So the difference between sensible and intellectual reality is discussed here as an epistemological concern with no distinction made with respect to the objects of intellectual knowledge that may be either material (ethereal matter, by which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá may mean the forces of heat, light, electricity, and magnetism) or spiritual (love). From the ontological perspective those nonsensible realities should be differentiated but they often are not when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speaks with reference to the theory of knowledge: “[T]he power of the mind is not sensible, nor are any of the human attributes: These are intelligible realities. Love, likewise, is an intelligible and not a sensible reality...Likewise, nature itself is an intelligible and not a sensible reality; the human spirit is an intelligible and not a sensible reality” (SAQ 16).

sight, hearing, and other senses, and hence it ceases to exist along with the rest of the sense organs at the moment of an individual's death. Therefore, being subject to decomposition, human intellect also proves to be part of the natural order.

In responding to these arguments, 'Abdu'l-Bahá distinguishes between physical and "ideal" endowments, material and ideal perception and virtues. He writes, for example, "The sense of sight in man is a physical virtue; but insight, the power of inner perception, is ideal in its nature" (*Promulgation* 325). He seems to agree with the materialists that "the power of ideation, or faculty of intellection, is material" insofar as it is based in the brain, but he also writes, in contrast to the position of the materialists: "The acquisition of the realities of phenomena is an ideal virtue; likewise, the emotions of man and his ability to prove the existence of God" (*Promulgation* 325).<sup>6</sup>

In various places 'Abdu'l-Bahá juxtaposes this contemporary European empiricist philosophy with the tradition of classical rationalism. He writes:

The criterion of judgment in the estimation of western philosophers is sense perception... The philosophers of the East consider the perfect criterion to be reason or intellect. . . and they state that the senses are the assistants and instruments of reason, and that although the investigation of realities may be conducted through the senses, the standard of knowing and judgment is reason itself " (*Promulgation* 355–56).

He continues:

The materialistic philosophers of the West declare that man belongs to the animal kingdom, whereas the phi-

<sup>6</sup> The translator used the term "ideal" here as interchangeable with "spiritual": "[T]he body of man expresses certain material virtues, but spirit of man manifests virtues that are ideal" (325). 'Abdu'l-Bahá considers memory to be an ideal entity: "The sense of hearing is a physical endowment, whereas memory in man is ideal" (325).



losophers of the East — such as Plato, Aristotle, and the Persian — divide the world of existence or phenomena of life into two general categories or kingdoms: one the animal kingdom, or world of nature, the other the human kingdom, or world of reason. (356–57)

As a definite proof that humanity transcends the world of nature and does not fully constitute a part of it, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá presents the following argument:

“[I]t is evident that in the world of nature conscious knowledge is absent. Nature is without knowing whereas man is conscious. . . .If it be claimed that the intellectual reality of man belongs to the world of nature — that it is a part of the whole — we ask is it possible for the part to contain virtues which the whole does not possess?” (*Promulgation* 360).

In other words: “Is it possible that the extraordinary faculty of reason in man is animal in character and quality?” (360) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s own answer to the question is that it is definitely not possible.

## REASON VERSUS REVELATION

In parallel with various types of cognition there can be empiricist, rationalist, intuitivist, and traditionalist or scriptural philosophy. John Locke, for instance, was a pioneer of empiricist philosophy in modern Europe. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in Ancient Greece, and Descartes and Leibniz in more recent western history advocated rationalist philosophy. The German thinker Schelling developed intuitivist philosophy that before him had flourished in various schools of religious mysticism.

Traditionalist and scriptural philosophy have roots in human culture as deep as the ancient rationalism of Plato and Aristotle. Already in sixth century BC China, Confucius taught a social and moral philosophy that was based on the “tradition of the past”

and such Chinese classics as the Book of Odes, the Book of Ritual, and others. Around the same time, Indians invented scriptural philosophy in order to defend the truth of Hinduism by means of rational arguments. Scholars estimate that the Hindu thinker Jaimini wrote the Mimamsa Sutra — the earliest treatise within the tradition of Hindu religious philosophy that belongs to the school of Purva Mimamsa — in the fourth century BC.

Philo of Alexandria is usually considered the first “scriptural philosopher” in the western intellectual tradition. Born around 20 BC and raised as an Orthodox Jew, Philo was heavily influenced by ancient rationalism. In his own philosophical system Philo created a synthesis of Jewish wisdom and Greek thought. More specifically, he supported the Revelation of Moses in the Torah by the philosophical speculation of Plato and the Stoics. Later Christian philosophers and theologians would engage in a similar enterprise but with respect to their own Christian scriptural writings.

In the Middle Ages, when philosophy became the servant of theology, such a method of philosophizing produced great works from individuals coming from diverse religious traditions — Shankara and Ramanuja in Hinduism, Avicenna in Islam, Hemachandra in Jainism, Moses Maimonides in Judaism, Chu Hsi in neo-Confucianism, and St. Thomas Aquinas in Christianity. From a philosophical perspective, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá belongs to the same tradition of scriptural philosophy as well. Even more so, in the Bahá’í Faith He is regarded as both the infallible interpreter of the writings of His father, Bahá’u’lláh, and as a source of Bahá’í scripture. And as always is the case with this type of philosophizing, it is the interplay between reason and revelation that constitutes the nerve of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s thought.

Revelation imparts the knowledge of God, and

“the grace of the Holy Spirit is the true criterion regarding which there is no doubt or uncertainty. . . That grace consists in the confirmations of the Holy Spirit which are vouchsafed to man and through which certitude is attained (SAQ 83).

The knowledge of God is delivered by God's messenger or, in Bahá'í terms, a Divine Manifestation who "is like a mirror wherein the Sun of Reality is reflected" (*Promulgation* 173). 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains in another place, "All the prophets and Messengers have come from One Holy Spirit and bear the Message of God fitted to the age in which they appear" (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 24). And in another talk given in London He says: "All the Manifestations of God bring the same Light; they only differ in degree, not in reality. . . The teaching is ever the same, it is only the outward forms that change" (66–67). Finally, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out, revelation often calls for explanations and interpretations:

Divine things are too deep to be expressed by common words. The heavenly teachings are expressed in parable in order to be understood and preserved for ages to come. When the spiritually minded dive deeply into the ocean of their meaning they bring to the surface the pearls of their inner significance. There is no greater pleasure than to study God's Word with a spiritual mind. (80)

Now, if revelation is necessarily the subject of interpretations, then reasoning, as the most potent agent of human cognition, must support it. Devoid of faith, human rationality becomes autonomous and self-sufficient, and it may lose its higher purpose "for with learning cometh arrogance and pride, and it bringeth on error and indifference to God" (*'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections*, 110). Without rational investigation, on the other hand, faith may turn into mere superstition. Hence the dialectic of philosophy and theology, of science and religion, that plays such an important role in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's thought.

The need for harmony between science and religion is one of the central principles of the Bahá'í Faith that was enunciated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His numerous speeches throughout Europe and America. In *Paris Talks* 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, for instance, that "any religion contrary to science is not the truth" (131). He explains further:

All religious laws conform to reason and are suited to the people for whom they are framed, and for the age in which they are to be obeyed. . . . I say unto you: weigh carefully in the balance of reason and science everything that is presented to you as religion. If it passes this test, then accept it, for it is truth! If, however, it does not so conform, then reject it, for it is ignorance!" (141–42, 144).

In another talk 'Abdu'l-Bahá consoles His listeners with regard to possible conflicts between faith and reason by stating: "Our Father will not hold us responsible for the rejection of dogmas which we are unable either to believe or comprehend, for He is ever infinitely just to His children" (26).

## LIMITATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

The limitations of knowledge are an important subject in modern western epistemology, especially after Immanuel Kant, the founder of German idealism, demonstrated, in his book *The Critique of Pure Reason*, the inherent limitations of human reasoning and questioned the possibility of metaphysics — the knowledge of the essences of things — as an exact science. 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not mention the Königsberg philosopher or his theories, but He touches upon Kantian themes in His writings.

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, human cognition is significantly limited in several ways. First — and here he echoes the German thinker — one cannot penetrate the essences of things apart from their qualities. Abdu'l-Bahá wrote:

"Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing and the knowledge of its attributes. The essence of each thing is known only through its attributes; otherwise, that essence is unknown and unfathomed (SAQ 59).

He further explains:

“The inner essence of man is unknown and unfathomed, but it is known and characterized by its attributes. . . the reality of the Divinity, too, must be unknown with regard to its essence and known only with respect to its attributes (59).

Likewise, the essence of the world of nature is also unknown and for the same reason. “Phenomenal or created things are known to us only by their attributes” (*Promulgation* 421).<sup>7</sup>

The second limitation of knowledge refers to humanity’s place in creation with a corresponding inability to know higher levels of existence. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá points out, the “difference in degree is ever an obstacle to comprehension of the higher by the lower, the superior by the inferior” (*Promulgation* 173). He also explains:

“A lower degree cannot comprehend a higher although all are in the same world of creation — whether mineral, vegetable or animal. In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product; but the vegetable has no knowledge or comprehension whatever of us” (114).

Hence, humans cannot comprehend Divinity and the spiritual realm since these are realities higher than that of their own. Neither can humans comprehend life after death, a situation similar to that of animals that have no understanding of the reality of human existence.

The third limitation of knowledge, according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, refers to the general liability of human cognition. As He points out, “these four criteria [of human knowledge] according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration”<sup>8</sup> (*Promulgation* 21). All of

<sup>7</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers here to the so-called objective knowledge that is gained through the bodily organs. In the case of subjective or spiritual knowledge he seems to accept the possibility of cognition of things-in-themselves.

<sup>8</sup> In *Some Answered Questions* ‘Abdu’l-Bahá omits intuition or inspiration and juxtaposes senses, reason, and tradition to the revelation of the Holy

them are liable to error. The sense perception, for instance, “is imperfect [because] it is subject to many aberrations and inaccuracies”<sup>9</sup> (253). As for human reasoning, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá argues:

They [the wise men of Greece, Rome, Persia and Egypt] held that every matter submitted to the reasoning faculty could be proved true or false and must be accepted or rejected accordingly. But in the estimation of the people of insight this criterion is likewise defective and unreliable, for [those] philosophers who held to reason or intellect as the standard of human judgment have differed widely among themselves upon every subject of investigation. . . . As they differ and are contradictory in conclusions, it is an evidence that the method and standard of test must have been faulty and insufficient. (254)

Religious traditions can also be incomplete and inconclusive because their interpretations are formed by human reasoning as well and, as a result, produce contradictory explanations.

Finally, intuition or inspiration, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá notes,

“are the promptings or susceptibilities of the human heart. The promptings of the heart are sometimes satanic. How are we to differentiate them? How are we to tell whether a given statement is an inspiration and prompting of the heart through the merciful assistance or through the satanic agency?” (*Promulgation* 254)

The conclusion ‘Abdu’l-Bahá arrives at is to combine all four standards of judgment in order to come to a more conclusive proof. He writes:

Consequently, it has become evident that the four criterion or standards of judgment by which the human

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Spirit in order to emphasize the uncertain character of human cognition as compared to Divine omniscience (83).

<sup>9</sup> In this quotation ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to the sense of sight but his analysis is equally applicable to all other senses.

mind reaches its conclusions are faulty and inaccurate. All of them are liable to mistake and error in conclusions. But a statement presented to the mind accompanied by proofs which the senses can perceive to be correct, which the faculty of reason can accept, which is in accord with traditional authority and sanctioned by the promptings of the heart, can be adjudged and relied upon as perfectly correct, for it has been proved and tested by all the standards of judgment and found to be complete. (255)

## CONCLUSION

Let me conclude my overview of the epistemological views of 'Abdu'l-Bahá with a brief discussion of the issue of certainty. The purpose of knowledge is to discover the truth, and with truth comes certitude. 'Abdu'l-Bahá believes in the possibility of achieving both — through the multiple sources of ordinary human cognition as well as by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which represents that “Truth never changes but man’s vision changes” (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 56).

From the standpoint of comparative philosophy, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was not the first individual to rely on multiple criteria of knowledge instead of just one. In classical Indian thought, for instance, philosophers relied on intuition and scriptural authority in addition to reason and sense perception.<sup>10</sup> Also, in ancient Chinese thought the founder of the school of Moism, Mo Tzu, taught that every principle must be verified by the three tests of judgment, which included its basis (will of heaven and tradition), its verifiability (sense perception, common sense), and its applicability (practical application).<sup>11</sup>

We know from the history of philosophy, furthermore, that even when multiple sources of knowledge are rigorously and sys-

<sup>10</sup> See “General Introduction” in *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, pp. xvii–xxx.

<sup>11</sup> See Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 211–31.

tematically applied there still remains a possibility of error since ordinary human cognition is imperfect, unlike the knowledge that is acquired through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In fact, if each one of the criteria of human knowledge is separately liable to error, then using two or more of them would greatly reduce, but not completely eliminate the chance of error, and although it seems unlikely that they would simultaneously err and thus result in a questionable judgment, this did happen in the history of philosophy.

That may be one of the reasons why numerous scriptural philosophers of the past, who used at least three of the standards of judgment — reason, tradition, and intuition — and who belonged to various religious traditions, did not come to agreement with each other and often defended contradictory and even opposite doctrines and theories. And that is why 'Abdu'l-Bahá, when speaking about divine and human knowledge, emphasizes the former over the latter.

'Abdu'l-Bahá said:

“Briefly the point is that in the human material world of phenomena these four are the only existing criteria or avenues of knowledge, and all of them are faulty and unreliable. What then remains? How shall we attain the reality of knowledge? By the breaths and promptings of the Holy Spirit, which is light and knowledge itself “ (*Promulgation* 22).

'Abdu'l-Bahá concludes: “All available human criteria are erroneous and defective, but the divine standard of knowledge is infallible” (22).

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# EPISTEMOLOGY AND BAHÁ'Í PHILOSOPHY

## Tractatus: A Logical Introduction To Bahá'í Philosophy (Tractatus Philosophico-Bahaïcus)

JEAN-MARC LEPAIN

### INTRODUCTION TO THE TRACTATUS AS A PROPAEDEUTIC TO BAHÁ'Í PHILOSOPHY

The *Tractatus* is not an academic paper in the usual sense of the expression, although it draws from a long philosophical tradition that includes Spinoza, Husserl, and Wittgenstein, and goes back to the use of theses in Middle Ages scholastic *disputatio*. The word *Tractatus* means “Treatise” in Latin and implies that the work is a complete exposition of a doctrine. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, for example, intended to give an exhaustive logical presentation of the relationship between reality and our mental representations of it through language. The present *Tractatus* is also trying to offer a logical, if not exhaustive, representation of reality, but this time based on a number of selected principles, or theses, extracted from the Bahá'í Writings and, because of the similarity of forms due to the use of numerals to specify short aphoristic propositions, the word *Tractatus* is used as an homage to Wittgenstein, the same way that the title of Wittgenstein’s book was an homage to Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, hence the subtitle *Tractatus Logico-Bahaïcus*.

Because the present *Tractatus* is an unusual document, it might be useful to explain in the first place its aims and its methodology,

complemented by a sort of short user guide. The history of the *Tractatus* is a good place to start because of its evolving nature.

The first version of the *Tractatus* was written in 1996 as part of a discussion with a group of Bahá'í scholars in the US and UK and was at that time only three pages long. My purpose was only to give to an English-speaking audience a summary of the main ideas that I had developed in three previous books and a number of short papers in French. However, as my research progressed, by 1998 the paper, which still had no title, had grown to ten pages. At that point, I found it necessary to give a better organization to the bullet points and I started to arrange them logically and to give them numbers. Someone in our discussion group noticed some similarities between this arrangement and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and as a joke started to refer to my paper as Jean-Marc's *Tractatus*. The name stuck to the paper and soon in our discussion, it became impossible to refer to it by another name, and when expanding it, I quickly understood all the benefits of following Wittgenstein's model of having theses or propositions arranged in a logical hierarchical order. After the 1996 version came a second expanded version and a third version to include new ideas emerging from my continuing research. The paper took a life of its own until it reached close to twenty-five pages. Twenty-five years later, the *Tractatus* is still a work in progress both in terms of scope and in terms of the need for fine-tuning through periodic revisions. Nothing in the *Tractatus* is definitive and everything is open for debate. It will remain a work in progress as long as I live.

The early versions of the *Tractatus* drew heavily on my papers on spirituality and individualism and on my book *Archéologie du Royaume de Dieu* (Archeology of the Kingdom of God). When writing *The Archaeology*, I had struggled with the question whether metaphysics should or should not be part of Bahá'í philosophy. It was a fashionable trend at that time to claim that metaphysics was a thing of the past which should be left out of all modern philosophy and replaced by epistemology. I had come myself to the conclusion that most traditional metaphysical questions are

intractable, and as Bahá'ís, we should avoid taking a position on them, but at the same time, I found it impossible to develop a Bahá'í philosophy without using concepts that include metaphysical content. However, I eventually became convinced that if Bahá'í scholars start using the language of essences, as Christian and Muslim scholars had done before, inevitably they would fall into the same trap leading to hair-splitting discussion that Bahá'u'lláh has denounced as “sciences that start with words and end with words”.<sup>1</sup> I had a kind of Eureka moment when reading what Dan Jordan wrote about human potential in his paper “Becoming Your True Self.” It appeared to me that one of the most essential teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is that **human nature is spiritual**. This is a revolutionary idea because in the history of philosophy, from Saint Augustine to Jean-Paul Sartre, from Thomas Hobbes to Behaviorism, there have been many theories about human nature, but no one before has ever advanced the proposition that human nature is spiritual. Definitely, a metaphysic of human nature could replace the old metaphysics of essence as a possible foundation for Bahá'í Philosophy. The *Tractatus* is the systematization of that idea. This is certainly not the only possible approach to Bahá'í philosophy but is certainly one worthy of being earnestly explored.

Besides evidencing a change of heart on my part regarding metaphysics, the *Tractatus* also reflects a change of methodology in my approach to the study of the Bahá'í teachings and writings. We have to remember that in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was only one model of Bahá'í scholarship illustrated by people like Hassan Balyuzi and Adib Taherzadeh and followed by a number of young scholars. This model of scholarship consisted either in

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<sup>1</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, on line at <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/epistle-son-wolf/epistle-son-wolf.pdf?bbca928>, p. 6. Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf, likened sciences that “begin with words and end with words” to “fruitless excursions into metaphysical hair-splittings”, and, in another letter, he explained that what Bahá'u'lláh primarily intended by such “sciences” are “those theological treatises and commentaries that encumber the human mind rather than help it to attain the truth” *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, note 110, pp. 214–5 available one-line at <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/b/KA/ka-127.html>.

exploring the early history of the Faith or in commenting on the original writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Central Figures, mainly based on historical considerations. This early model of Bahá'í scholarship required a good knowledge of Persian and Arabic as well as familiarity with Islamic philosophy and literature. My book *L'Archéologie du Royaume de Dieu* (*The Archaeology of the Kingdom of God*) was written in that tradition. Initially, I conceived of the book as an answer to Professor Henri Corbin who was my teacher at the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. Corbin used to disparage the Faith for having no intellectual depth and for having, in his view, broken with the philosophical tradition of Iran. This is the reason the book emphasized so heavily the discussion on the continuity from early Judaism to Islam and the Bahá'í Writings, while showing that this continuity does not necessarily mean imitation or repetition of the past, but could also lead to conceptual innovations, and introduce a paradigm shift. This is how I became entangled in the metaphysical issues mentioned above. However, after completing the book I got the impression of having reached a dead-end. Pouring new wine into old wineskins can lead a scholar nowhere. No matter the historical connections I had exposed, and despite my demonstration that Bahá'u'lláh had given new meanings to old terminology, I had the impression that this knowledge could play only a limited role in the necessary intellectual development of the Faith and the building up of knowledgeable Bahá'í communities, because the issues debated were no longer currently relevant to modern societies. This is the reason I decided to turn my attention to sociology and to the philosophy of science.

If Bahá'ís want to meet the intellectual challenges of our time, they should look at the current issues debated by our contemporaries and turn to the Bahá'í Writings to find solutions consonant with the teachings of the Faith. Rather than trying to explain the writings of the Faith in the light of past history and old philosophy, I started to study contemporary problems to see how they could relate to the Bahá'í teachings. However, one of the difficulties of this approach is that most of the time the Writings give only indi-

rect answers found at the end of a chain of reasoning. In order to find these answers, we need new tools in the form of key concepts that can be used to form new ways of reasoning, and to facilitate and expedite the clarification of our reasoning processes in the context of these new intellectual pathways. Hence my use of theses and propositions in the *Tractatus*.

In the 1970s and the 1980s, Bahá'ís had only simple and often naïve answers to contemporary problems. One of these simple answers was that establishing the unity of humanity would solve all the problems of the world; however, there was no clear idea offered by us on the ways to bring about that unity. I heard once Douglas Martin calling this naïve approach to addressing contemporary issues “the Disneyland version of the Faith.” This is precisely that version that had put off a number of intellectuals, starting with Louis Nicolas, the French translator of the Bayán at the beginning of the twentieth century and Prof. Henri Corbin, as already mentioned. I call this naïve understanding of the Faith “the reductionist version” because it tends to reduce the Faith to the ten, or sometimes, twelve principles once famously stated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Of course, it is not that there is anything wrong with his masterly exposition of these principles, but rather that, in summary form, they have lost their novelty because there is now a large consensus in society in favour of most of these principles, while the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh embrace a much wider scope of issues and hold implications for a diverse range of other important questions. This reductionist approach tends to ignore the conceptual wealth that can be found in the Writings of the Faith. The present work is only another feeble attempt to bring into practical use this conceptual wealth of the Bahá'í Writings by offering to the reader a conceptual toolbox. The *Tractatus* is that toolbox.

The idea of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is that reality can only be captured by language made up of components that can be successively disaggregated until reaching fundamentally irreducible objects or facts which are the foundation of reality. One difference between Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and mine is that Wittgenstein starts from an empirical observation of reality and language

whereas I start with the question: “How do the Bahá’í Writings see the world?”. The second difference is that Wittgenstein, following Bertrand Russell’s Logical Atomism, was assuming that most fundamental components of reality are discreet and causally unrelated, whereas I think that the Bahá’í position is just the opposite: all components of reality are causally related through necessary relationships forming an interconnected web of phenomena. Nevertheless, as we are looking at reality through the Bahá’í Writings, the irreducible objects we are dealing with are some axioms without which other theses could not be formulated. “The nature of man is spiritual” is one of these postulates, and I consider it as one of the most fundamental propositions of Bahá’í philosophy. This is the reason that the *Tractatus* starts with this proposition and is organized around it. To be sure, there are other ideas in the Bahá’í Writings which are equally fundamental. One is, for example, the idea of the unicity or uniqueness of reality. There is only one reality and the tendency to think in dichotomous terms leading to separating the spiritual from the material is something that happens only in the human mind. Arguably, it would be possible to write another *Tractatus* arranged around the thesis of the unicity of reality or probably several other similarly important foundational postulates. This remark is intended to highlight the fact that the *Tractatus* only presents one view of things, while multiple views are necessary to improve our understanding of reality. A diversity of views would, indeed, serve to enhance our perception and understanding of reality.

As already mentioned, the subtitle of the *Tractatus* is *Tractatus Philosophico-Bahaïcus* as an homage to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. A second subtitle that appears just after the Introduction is “*Proposed Theses for Establishing A Foundation of Bahá’í Philosophy*”. Clearly the *Tractatus* is a work of philosophy, but perhaps not in the usual sense of the word, because in the Bahá’í Faith, philosophy is being called to play a new role that, at this stage, still remains to be defined. In fact, all religions have made use of philosophy in various and different ways. Christians have transformed philosophy into theology, Muslims have devel-

oped Islamic philosophy into a system that has a much broader scope than Christian theology and tends to be all-embracing. And, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'ís shall have a "Divine Philosophy". The expression "Divine Philosophy" (*falsafih-yi-ilá'í*) can be misleading in English. "Divine" here does not mean concerned with or pertaining to God or inspired by God but concerned with divine things that are spiritual things because what is spiritual would, properly understood, manifest divine qualities. A better translation would be "Spiritual Philosophy". 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings provide only very sketchy indications on the question of the scope and methodology of that philosophy. In *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that philosophy is of two kinds: natural and divine (spiritual) and he says that "Natural Philosophy seeks knowledge of physical verities (entities) and explains material phenomena, whereas Divine Philosophy deals with ideal verities and phenomena of the spirit."<sup>2</sup> To understand fully this passage we need to remember that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, when addressing Western audiences, often chose to use Aristotelian terminology, not necessarily because he supported Aristotelian philosophy, but because the Persian language had inherited from Arabic a stock of Aristotelian words and expressions that could be easily translated into European languages, whereas many concepts of Islamic mysticism used by Bahá'u'lláh have no equivalent in English.

In the context of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings, the word philosophy is used very much in the Greek original meaning and encompasses all human investigations of reality. Basically 'Abdu'l-Bahá is saying that knowledge can be divided into two branches: natural philosophy and divine philosophy or spiritual philosophy. In Aristotelian parlance "natural philosophy" is the knowledge that is derived from the observation of the world of nature and that is equivalent to "science" in our modern terminology. From these observations, we can surmise and understand that divine philosophy includes

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<sup>2</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Wilmette, Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1982 (subsequently abbreviated as "PUP"), p. 326.



all knowledge that does not appertain to our understanding of the physical reality from a scientific perspective.

In other passages, 'Abdu'l-Bahá sketches a very broad programme for divine philosophy by declaring that its object is "the sublimation of human nature, spiritual advancement, heavenly guidance for the development of the human race, attainment to the breaths of the Holy Spirit and knowledge of the verities of God",<sup>3</sup> as well as "the discovery and realization of spiritual verities", "the discovery of the Mysteries of God, the comprehension of spiritual realities, the wisdom of God, inner significance of the heavenly religions and the foundation of the law",<sup>4</sup> and he complains that Divine Philosophy "has been outdistanced and neglected".<sup>5</sup> Somewhere else he adds that "the most important principle of divine philosophy is the oneness of the world of humanity, the unity of humankind, the bond conjoining East and West, the tie of love which blends human hearts."<sup>6</sup> From this last quotation we could understand that the purpose of divine philosophy is to look for practical ways of reaching humanity's oneness and to unite the whole of humankind. Considering the scope given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Divine Philosophy, the conclusion that we can draw from these quotations is that Divine Philosophy is simply the study of the entire Divine Revelation with the purpose of looking for ways and means of implementation of its teaching and principles; something that 'Abdu'l-Bahá also calls the "divine science",<sup>7</sup> which as we already pointed out means "the spiritual science". We can also understand that in Divine Philosophy there is no separation between secular, religious or spiritual knowledge. All forms of human knowledge can be used for achieving the purpose of Divine Philosophy, including ethics, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and political sciences. But we can also assume that new sciences and innovative forms of knowledge will emerge, and one

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<sup>3</sup> PUP, pp. 326–27.

<sup>4</sup> PUP, p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> PUP, p. 327.

<sup>6</sup> PUP, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> PUP, p. 138.

of these new forms of knowledge could be the science of spiritual development, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's early translator, in what might have been a clumsy translation rendered by using phrases such as "the sublimation of human nature", "spiritual advancement", "heavenly guidance for the development of the human race...", etc.

The *Tractatus* tries to achieve three major goals. The first is to provide an epistemological foundation for Bahá'í philosophy. The second is to identify the general principles that could guide and inform that philosophy, and the last goal is to translate concepts found in the Bahá'í Writings into a modern language that is more easily accessible to our contemporaries.

Transposing the Bahá'í Writings into modern contemporary language is an important task of Bahá'í philosophy and scholarship. Shoghi Effendi has, in his work as translator and Interpreter, already set a precedent and begun that process. For example, where Bahá'u'lláh says literally "renunciation of imitation" (*tark-i taqlíd*), Shoghi Effendi rendered it as "elimination of prejudices" and "personal and independent investigation of truth" on the basis of reference to the many passages of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá which encourage independent thinking. Because Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke and wrote in Persian and Arabic, they could only use a vocabulary that was then devoid of the concepts which are used today in Western languages, and their style often follows the literary conventions of their time. Their writings, when translated, might sound very poetical, but part of their meaning might be lost on people who are unfamiliar with the terminology and with the use of a non-linear form of presentation of ideas. The *Tractatus* offers an alternative reading in an effort to overcome these obstacles and prefers to speak of "spiritual values" rather than "spiritual attributes", and of "subject" or "individual" rather than "believer". It also makes use of concepts common in the social sciences such as sociology and psychology which appear relevant and appropriately applicable to the Bahá'í discourse such the "individuation process", "naturalization process", etc.

The *Tractatus* is founded upon four types of theses. The first type consists of propositions that can be found textually in the

Writings of the Faith, sometimes quoted verbatim herein. These propositions are rather limited in number, but highly important as they provide the internal structure of the work, the bones that can be fleshed. Good examples are the “dual nature” of the humans being both spiritual and animal, the unicity of reality; the existence of a universal web of necessary relationships linking all components of reality, material as well as spiritual; emanation and manifestation being considered the two fundamental processes at work in the world of creation; an ever-advancing civilization being the ultimate purpose of religion, etc.

A second type of thesis are those theses that cannot be found textually in the Writings of the Faith but are the generalization of an idea distilled from the analysis of multiple quotations after transposition into western languages. The most conspicuous example of this, in the *Tractatus*, is the proposition that “Human nature is spiritual”. There is no quotation in the Writings that says “human nature is spiritual” because in the nineteenth century Arabic or Persian had no word to express the concept of “human nature” common in Western philosophy and anthropology. The word *fi-tra*, which could stand for it in Arabic, means only something like “original dispositions” or “innate inclination”. Meanwhile, in the nineteenth century, the West did not yet have a concept of spirituality, which becomes an object of discussion only at the beginning of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the idea of a spiritual human nature seems to emerge from the Writings of the Central Figures of the Faith. In like manner, where Bahá'u'lláh speaks of “vain imaginings” I chose to speak of self-delusion. The transposition of the concept allows us to link it to researches in contemporary psychology on cognitive biases and strategies used by individuals either to escape unpleasant truths about themselves and society or to justify extreme ideologies and practices that contradict moral values such as racism, ethnic cleansing, religious extremism, etc.

We can call the first two types of theses “primary propositions” because they represent the foundation of Bahá'í philosophy. A third type of thesis is constituted by secondary propositions that can be deduced from primary propositions. If primary proposi-

tions A and B are true, we can deduce that in  $A+B=C$ , C must be true. For example, if we assume that human nature is spiritual and that one of the purposes of religion is the development of our spiritual potentialities, we can deduce (a) true human development must be a spiritual process and not only an intellectual process, and (b) that we must strive to eliminate from the organization of human society everything that appears as contradictory to the process of human and spiritual development.

Finally, a fourth type of thesis used in the discourses of the *Tractatus* are those theses that cannot be found in the Bahá'í Writings but that are either common knowledge or are conceptual theories necessary for linking the other theses together. It can include psychological or sociological concepts such as the concept of consciousness (or the idea of the soul) or the concept of the individual. No one would dispute that there is such a thing as consciousness while no scientific theory has ever successfully explained consciousness. Consciousness is a formidable challenge for science but also for any form of philosophy. In the same manner, there is no explicit definition of the concept of the individual in the Bahá'í Writings that use in Arabic and Persian words only vaguely related to the modern concept, but it is not difficult to demonstrate that many of the qualities attributed to individuals in sociology such as autonomy, auto-determination, self-reliance, and independent thinking, are all highly encouraged in the Bahá'í Writings. Louis Dumont, in his *Essay on Individualism*,<sup>8</sup> provides remarkable insight into the relationship between religion, individualism and spiritual life. Holist and traditional societies put limits on spiritual development because they want conformity from individuals and they prioritize the replication of an immutable social order, not the flourishing of individuals. In such a society, those who want to have the chance of living a spiritual life can only do it at the price of accepting that they must live on the fringes of

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<sup>8</sup> Dumont, Louis, *Essay on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, and *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (Nature of Human Society), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981.

society as medicine-men, shamans, monks, nuns, hermits, anchorites, dervishes, sadhus, etc. The story of the early life of Buddha leaving his father's palace to become a wandering truth seeker is a good example of that situation. Christianity and Islam started as promoting early forms of spiritual individualism before reverting to the defense of a holist social order when they achieved dominance. But while every religion encourages a certain form of individualism, the Bahá'í Faith is the first religion to promote a form of spiritual individualism, as it recommends the independent search for truth and promotes individual initiative and autonomy through a bottom-up consultative process. In the same vein, during the past century, psychology has said a lot about love and attachment. When reviewed in the light of the thesis that human nature is spiritual, one can conclude that attachment is devoid of a spiritual dimension whereas true love has a spiritual dimensionality. Animals are bound to their offspring by attachment, not by love. The human infant bonds to his mother by attachment while his mother might reciprocate, but not necessarily always, by true love. For the child, human and spiritual development means the gradual transformation of primitive attachment into love, and for the adult, it means to find ways by which to spiritualize his capacity for expressing love to others through the sacrifice of selfish desires. As shown by Bowlby,<sup>9</sup> children who start their life with an insecure attachment develop at a considerable disadvantage and are impeded in their normal psychological and emotional development and, we might add, in their spiritual development as well. The theory of attachment connects well with the theory of the individual because early insecure attachment can explain why some individuals embrace extreme ideology, fail in establishing a stable family and have difficulties embracing spiritual development. The theory of attachment throws a considerable amount of light on what Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá say about love and how it can be assigned the task of advancing the spiritualization of humankind.

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<sup>9</sup> Bowlby, John, *A Secure Base*, London, Routledge, 2005.

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In Modern times and, more specifically, since the appearance in 1781 of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, epistemological issues acquired a special significance in philosophical studies. With the rise of Biblical criticism, Christian scriptural philosophy had lost its momentum, and nineteenth and twentieth-century thinkers focused on sense perception and reason as the two primary sources of human cognition.

A recently conceived and developed religious movement, the Bahá'í faith reintroduces the scriptural mode of thinking into philosophical inquiries. Its scriptural texts are well preserved and authenticated. Many of the writings by the founding figures of the faith explicitly address critical philosophical problems. They also employ the Aristotelian technical vocabulary with occasional addition of neo-Platonic terms.

In the West, epistemological studies from a Bahá'í perspective started in 1978 with the publication of Jack McLean's essay "The Knowledge of God: An Essay on Bahá'í Epistemology." Since then, Bahá'í thinkers have addressed different aspects of epistemological research. They discussed the independent search for truth, the standards of knowledge, the problems of certainty and relativity, infallibility, and interpretation, as well as mystical experience. All those topics are explored in-depth in corresponding chapters of the book.



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Sergeev has authored and edited twelve books, including the monograph, *Theory of Religious Cycles: Tradition, Modernity, and the Bahá'í Faith*, (Brill, 2015) and his latest, *Russian Philosophy in the Twenty-First Century: An Anthology* (Brill, 2020).



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