Mind: The Power of the Human Spirit

Mind, process discussed earlier in
the paper, that
holds promise for the future of humanity.
“the Power of the Résumé
Human Spirit” Le présent article met en
corrélation les
concepts bahá’ís de la raison avec les per-
spectives de la philosophie. Il expose des
arguments provenant des deux sources en
GERALD FILSON
vue d’une compréhension non réductrice de
la raison humaine. Il fait valoir que même
Abstract si la science peut nous aider
à mieux com-
This paper correlates Bahá’í concepts of prendre la raison, elle
n’est pas suffisante
the mind with insights from philosophy. It dans cette quête car elle ne
peut pas saisir
presents arguments from both sources for a pleinement comment la raison
humaine fait
non-reductive understanding of the human l’expérience de la
réalité. L’auteur passe en
mind and argues that, although science can revue le mode de connaissance
conceptu-
help us advance our understanding of the elle de la raison, explore
les implications
mind, it is not sufficient in this pursuit, as it du langage pour la
philosophie de la raison
cannot capture fully how the human mind et examine comment
l’activité scientifique
experiences reality. The paper reviews et le phénomène religieux
permettent tous
the mind’s conceptual way of knowing, deux de nous éclairer sur
les capacités et la
explores the implications of language for nature de la raison.
L’auteur avance que le

philosophy of mind, and considers how the pursuit of science and the phenomenon of religion both shed light on the capacities and nature of the mind. After suggesting that the process of learning in which the global Bahá'í community has embarked may serve as a model for engaging the human mind in a collective enterprise for the betterment of the world, it turns back to philosophy to submit that, while many contemporary philosophers persuasively argue that the human mind is not reducible to physical causality, the philosophical resistance to a spiritual dimension of the human mind is excessively limiting. The minds of human beings demonstrate capacities that lie beyond nature, and a conception of the mind as "the power of the human spirit" or "rational soul" can not only be a fruitful way of understanding the mind, but lead to an orientation by human beings in the world, demonstrated through the learning

processus d'apprentissage dans lequel est engagée la communauté mondiale bahá'íe peut servir de modèle pour faire intervenir la raison humaine dans une entreprise collective visant l'amélioration du monde. Il fait ensuite un retour à la philosophie et affirme que si plusieurs philosophes contemporains soutiennent de manière convaincante que la raison humaine ne se réduit pas à la causalité physique, la résistance des philosophes à l'idée d'une dimension spirituelle de la raison humaine est extrêmement limitative. La faculté de raisonnement des êtres humains démontre des capacités qui transcendent la nature, et une conception de la raison en tant que « pouvoir de l'esprit humain » ou « âme rationnelle » peut non seulement se révéler fructueuse pour comprendre la raison, mais elle peut aussi permettre aux êtres humains d'orienter le monde, comme l'a démontré le processus d'apprentissage discuté plus

haut dans l'article, et ainsi, se révéler pro-

metteur pour l’avenir de l’humanité.

Resumen

Este artículo relaciona los conceptos Bahá’ís de la mente con pensamientos filosóficos. Presenta argumentos de ambas fuentes para un entendimiento no reduccionista de la mente humana y argumenta que, a pesar que la ciencia puede ayudarnos avanzar nuestra comprensión de la mente, no es suficiente en esta búsqueda, ya que no puede captar completamente como la mente humana experimenta la realidad. El artículo revisa la manera conceptual de la mente para conocer, explora las implicaciones del lenguaje para la filosofía de la mente, y considera como tanto la búsqueda de la ciencia como el fenómeno de la religión irradian luz sobre las capacidades y la naturaleza de la mente. Después de sugerir que el proceso de aprendizaje en el cual la comunidad mundial Bahá’í se ha embarcado podría servir como un modelo para involucrarse en un emprendimiento colectivo para el mejoramiento del mun-

This paper is about the human mind, identified by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as “the power of the human spirit” (Some Answered Questions 55:6).1 I compare Bahá’í concepts with some insights from contemporary philosophy of mind that are similar to Bahá’í views. As with any philosophical question, there is a broad range of positions on the mind in philosophy, but my focus on points of similarity is deliberate. On the one hand, some of the more naturalistic or computational philosophical approaches to the mind, which resonate less with a Bahá’í understanding, are well represented by approaches to consciousness that take consciousness or artificial intelligence as their models; these are explored in due course. On the other hand, and more fundamentally, the focus on similarity supports the goal of the paper, which

do, vuelve a la filosofía para aceptar que, mientras muchos filósofos contemporáneos en forma persuasiva argumentan que la mente humana no se puede reducir a la causalidad física, la resistencia filosófica a una dimensión espiritual de la mente humana es excesivamente limitada. Las mentes de los seres humanos demuestran capacidades que yacen más allá de la naturaleza, y una concepción de la mente como "el poder del espíritu humano" o "el alma racional" puede no solo ser una manera fructífera para entender la mente, sino conduce a una orientación para los seres humanos en el mundo, demostrado por el proceso de aprendizaje discutido anteriormente en el artículo, lo cual es prometedor para el futuro de la humanidad.

is to assist readers to see how insights from philosophy and from the Bahá'í writings can complement each other, and contribute to discourse in this area. The paper is structured around three interweaving strands of argument. In the first, to gain some idea of the nature of the mind, I explore helpful insights from philosophy that help to illuminate the insufficiency of reductive explanations of the mind that rely solely on physical or natural explanations, thereby implying (or stating explicitly) that the mind is a purely physical and causality. More fundamentally, the reductionist accounts fail to provide an adequate qualitative description of consciousness itself; and while science may aspire to progressively "fill in the gaps" to create a complete

1 The ideas in this paper grew out of a presentation to a colloquium on human nature organized by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) in December 2020. I am grateful to the ISGP and to Lydia LeMay, Ilya Shodjaee, Todd Smith, and Levin Zendeh for their helpful comments on the presentation which have been extended in this paper.

picture of
natural phenomenon. I canvass philos- consciousness rooted in physical
cau-
ophy that provides logical support for sality, philosophers have
persuasively
the Bahá'í view of the mind as a unique argued that an accurate
description
power that lies beyond physical expla- of consciousness requires a kind
of
nations that aim to level the human knowledge that science simply
cannot
mind to animal rationality, describe it access.
as arising entirely out of the operations The second strand of argument
of the physical brain, or propose that ar- elaborates on what, then, an
adequate
tificial intelligence (AI) will reproduce philosophical approach to the mind
the power of the human mind. These entails, one that takes account of
reductionist accounts stand at odds those features of mind that cannot
be
with our intuitive understanding of the reduced to animal or computational
mind, of course. After all, we don't say models. Such an approach must
pro-
that neurons or physical dynamics in vide a more complete account of
the
the brain read and write music, just as human mind and consciousness than
we don't say that feathers and wings either neuroscience, animal
rationality,
fly. Birds fly, using these parts of their or AI. I therefore explore
philosophical
anatomy, and people compose music in accounts of the mind that, like a
Bahá'í
their own minds by way of their con- view, emphasize a range of
capacities
scious appreciations.2 But philosophy of the mind: knowledge and
rationality
can help us move beyond an intuitive certainly, but also feelings
(attitudes
sense that there must be something and emotions) and purposefulness
(the
more to the human mind than these intentionality of the mind). I
argue that
reductionist models suggest, and pro- a philosophy that appreciates
these
vide reasoned arguments for why, for features of the mind and grapples
with
example, despite the success of neuro- their implications for human
agency,

scientific efforts in correlating brain activity with some features of consciousness, they fall short of demonstrating neuroscience that seeks to flatten these capacities into purely physical terms, and thereby loses sight of the fullness of what they are.

2 This observation comes from Colin McGinn's rebuttal of Patricia Churchland's reduction of mind to the physical across several issues of the New York Review of Books. See, for example, McGinn's "Storm Over the Brain."

The third strand focuses on where and how a Bahá'í contribution to our understanding of the mind may help expand current philosophical positions. Even in philosophy that resonates in important ways with a Bahá'í understanding of the mind, there are, of course, differences. Most contemporary philosophers, for instance, even when they reject the reduction of mind to narrowly physical computational processes, still insist on placing the mind within the natural world rather than accepting the possibility that the mind is embedded in a reality that goes beyond the natural. This, however, requires highly abstract arguments, such as those I engage with typically under-stands the mind's essential features to be "human agency" and "normativity," concepts relating to the freedom and spontaneity of the mind. Through normativity, we take responsibility for our judgments and perceptions: we (potentially) choose how to evaluate the world around us, rather than passively receiving value judgments pre-formed in the world, the way we receive sense impressions. Through human agency, we choose our actions.5 Though "human agency" is not too distant from the meaning of "the power of the human

as McDowell's position that our capac- spirit," which on its face could be un-
ities of mind are "second nature," or derstood as describing a supra-physical
references to "normativity" that remain capacity emerging from an essentially
apart from a natural scientific explana- physical being, contemporary philos-
tion. These positions have shortcom- ophy resists the idea of the "rational
ings, in my view, that an acceptance soul" which, for 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is
of a wider, "extended reality"3 above
and beyond the physical or the natural Some Answered Questions 55:5). Further
would avoid. Such a reality can better research on the use of these terms in the
account for the qualitative "feel" of original language texts may provide in-
consciousness and its immateriality. sight into the logic behind specific uses of
The idea of an extended world is, of each. It may be that in some cases 'Abdu'l-
course, built into a Bahá'í approach to Bahá's choice of one or the other term is
based on His audience's framework for
the question of mind, which centers on
thinking about the nature of this human
the "power of the human spirit" or "the
essence; perhaps in other cases the choice
rational soul."4 Conversely, the philos- is meant to highlight a particular facet of
this essence which, by its nature, cannot be

3 I take this term from Thomas Nagel. encompassed by language. There may of course be other considerations.

4 "Spirit" and "soul" (sometimes "rational soul") refer to the same general concept in authoritative Bahá'í writings. "The human spirit, which distinguishes man from the animal, is the rational soul, and these two terms—the human

5 "Both Heidegger and Korsgaard, following Kant, conceive of human agency in terms of … normativity" (Rousse 417); "If there is room for a substantial conception of the will in contemporary theorizing about human agency, it is most likely to be

spirit and the rational soul – designate one and the same thing" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 195).

Mind, "the Power of the Human Spirit" equivalent to "the power of the human spirit," and which is an essence that is ontologically supra-physical. Still, it may be that "normativity" and "human agency" are merely useful labels that cover insurmountable problems in philosophy's efforts to gain a genuine understanding of the mind and of human action. I suggest an alternative approach that relies on the power of the human spirit in the final sections of this paper.

The paper is structured around these three strands as follows. In Part One, I explore how different the human mind is from animal rationality, focusing on the uniquely conceptual nature of the human mind. In Part Two, I explore implications of the conceptual nature of the mind relating to learning and objectivity, and suggest that in its reliance on self-conscious awareness as the foundation of thought, as well as in

found in the vicinity of the phenomenon of normativity" (Wallace

investigating reality and generating knowledge, but that, like any form of human knowledge, it is an outgrowth of human agency, or in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's terms, the power of the rational soul. It is a capacity that operates at a level of consciousness that cannot be reduced to causal interactions at the physical level in the brain. Having thus examined how science can both shed light on the mind, and have its own nature illumined by careful consideration of the nature of the mind's capacity to conduct scientific investigation, in Part Five I explore the same questions with respect to religion. Religion, like science, cannot simply be understood as a creation of the human brain; it is instead a powerful way of knowing for human beings, precisely because of the human mind's unique capacities to know. I comment on the language of Revelation, and the power of

that its capacities for feeling and purposefulness, and its essential holism, the human mind is categorically distinguishable from AI. I add comments in Part Three about language as a central instrument of the mind. These sections together demonstrate that explanations confined to natural science are unable to account for the mind's faculties of knowing, feeling, and purposefulness, features of mind that not only shape consciousness on an individual level, but have allowed humans collectively to generate progressive civilization, a phenomenon with no parallel in the natural world. In Part Four, I argue that scientific practice is an exemplary expression of the mind's capacity for cogni-
tive capacity of the mind, but also the feelings and purposefulness of human reality. The phenomenon of religion, therefore, helps give us a fuller appreciation of the nature of the human mind: engagement with Revelation can engender feelings, thoughts and purposefulness that strengthen the mind's relationship to an extended reality beyond space and time, to a world that is expansive beyond the merely sensible environment of the animal.
Finally, in Part Six, I consider whether understanding the mind as an essentially spiritual phenomenon—as "the power of the human spirit" or "rational soul"—can help lend coherence to a

philosophy of mind that rejects a narrow physicalist understanding of mind, and if so, how such a paradigm can be presented in philosophical terms.

This paper is inspired by a talk giv-
with Abdu'l-Bahá's statements on this matter. For McDowell, a primary difference between the animal and human is that the human mind has a conceptual way of knowing and engaging the

en by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on 20 September 1912, in which He says that philosophy should make efforts to seek understanding of both physical and spiritual aspects of reality. In that talk, He specifically credits the enduring importance of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle to the way they combined physical and spiritual dimensions in their philosophy (Promulgation ch. 105). The philosophers I cite in this paper have devoted years of study to those great figures of the western philosophical tradition, and in their own ways, they show the fruitfulness of a philosophy that, if not explicitly embracing the spiritual, is not hidebound by an insistence on materialist reductionism.

Since antiquity, philosophers have compared human beings with animals,

world, while the animal responds to an immediate environment. “World” and “environment” are distinguished by the fact that where an environment is defined by its materiality and sensibility, a world is a conceptual construct that includes both features immediately sensed, but also (and usually far more) features that reside as concepts in the human mind. Thus, an animal’s environment, in this use of the term, consists of everything to which it has direct sensory access in a given moment. This sensing may trigger memories that prompt action; but the human mind situates itself in a wider world, within which it can invoke memories, concepts, imaginations, etc., including ones not triggered by immediate sensory input. In a similar way, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that “the animal perceives sensible things but cannot perceive conceptual realities” (Some Answered Questions 48:6). “Of this power of discovery which belongeth to the human mind, this power which can grasp abstract and universal ideas, the animal remaineth totally ignorant”

both in order to distinguish these two realities and to connect them. The work of John McDowell, one of the foremost philosophers of mind working today, provides useful insight into the limitations of an animal model for understanding human consciousness.

McDowell's arguments resonate

'Abdu'l-Bahá, understands the human mind as reliant on an enormous number of concepts that shape a world the mind then has in view. Concepts are the means by which the mind perceives and engages with that world. Some concepts represent the material features of the world: by concepts we know red from green, for example, and also know that red is in the concept class of color, which is distinct from the concept class of texture. These materially grounded concepts exist alongside others that supply us with the meanings we need in order to navigate the human world of institutions, norms, values, principles, and language. Thus, to

(Selections 163:2).6 McDowell, like 'Abdu'l-Bahá to be in line with Markus Gabriel's definition of a concept: "a concept is something by means of which we can distinguish some-thing or some things from other things. The concept of a dog distinguishes dogs from

6 I take the meaning of "conceptu-al" for both McDowell and

also imply other concepts in chains of implication or assumptions: some con-cepts are assumed implicitly in order to understand other concepts. Humans do not draw on concepts in isolation; our capacity to know depends on the inter-relationships between many concepts.

As philosopher Markus Gabriel puts it:

> Whatever is real is integrated in a network of concepts. Every con-cept refers to another. If you know a concept, you thereby know a bunch of others too. This thesis is known as semantic holism and says that you're able to deploy a concept only if you're able to

such crucial parts of our daily experience as feelings and purposes are also conceptual, yet immaterial. Through concepts, we distinguish indignation from anger, generosity from kindness. We learn from infancy thousands and thousands of concepts that shape the world we have in view. Many concept classes are nested within other concept classes; "dog" is a concept nested within the broader concept "animal," yet itself encompasses the concepts of "German shepherd," "poodle," and other breeds of dog. This is only one of many ways in which concepts are profoundly interdependent. Concepts and sensations are empty (Mind and World). Concepts allow us to understand what we perceive, and consciousness" is always shaped by our understanding: "objects come into view for us [by sensations] in actualizations of capacities that are fully conceptual" (McDowell, World in View 34–35).

deploy a whole battery of further concepts that stand in various logical relations to it. (Meaning 194)

This emphasis on the role of concepts in human thought is not to deny the importance of sense perception and direct experience. We take in our experience by way of our senses, but in a manner that must always be mediated by the conceptual for us to have any experience at all. To paraphrase Kant, whom McDowell draws on to develop his own idea of the conceptual, sensations without concepts are blind, concepts without human experience cats, but also from lions and earlobes" (Gabriel, Meaning 192). Importantly, a "sensory concept in this sense does not require direct sensory comparison in order to distinguish two things. Thus, while an animal can distinguish different things by sight or smell, the human can distinguish them in the abstract using concepts.

In other words, to be receptive to the physical world we rely on a conceptual idea of a world that is already "there" in the mind, so that as we perceive and recognize features of the world (whether material objects or abstract realities), they are then available for placement within the world we have in view—or close enough to allow relative adjustments to a world that shapeshifts as we gain further knowledge of it. Successive experiences of life bring to us a manifold of sensations that we are able to grasp by the elimination and reduction of the available information—the millions of sensory bits available to our senses—bringing to our experience an understandable world that we then have in mind.[7] "Our subjective beliefs on the physical world have a decisive role on how we perceive reality . . . All that we perceive might be deeply contaminated by our subjective beliefs on the world" (Tabas, qtd. in "We Hear"). We interpret the sensations we experience in the world by way of the concepts we have learned, and through these concepts we then make judgments about the world and take actions—for reasons that are themselves as we advance matters at hand, or bring about a better world we have in view.

There is thus an inseparable cooperation of sensibility and conceptuality that cannot be disentangled. This interplay between sense and concept does not seem to operate in the same way in animal cognition. In McDowell's assessment, which resonates with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanations on the topic, animals may appear to reason in a manner that seems comparable to human reasoning, but their reasoning is always a response to an environment and to particulars, not to a world. The animal "reasons" by way of differential response repertoires that rely on

7 Psychologist Timothy Wilson estimates that the brain is inundated with

acute
“11 million discrete bits of information senses, and their excellent memory of
per second, of which no more than 40 can environments and the particulars with-
be consciously processed” (qtd. in Heath, in such environments. In short, the
Enlightenment 2.0 73). An animal, of animal distinguishes particulars not
course, may receive as much sensory data conceptually, but by acute sensibility
as a human being—or more, for animals with keener senses than ours—but to the
and memory—which, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá extent that they react to and engage with points out, are often better than human
an environment without needing to under- sensibility and memory, which have
stand it, the simplifying function of con- different functions than strict fidelity
cepts is not necessary for them. For recent to the physical and the natural (Some
discussions by neuroscientists on how our Answered Questions 48:2).
consciousness maps patterns of synaptic The animal’s ability to distinguish
firings in the brain onto conceptual pat- between particular objects, and even
terns, see Antonio Damasio’s Feeling and human gestures, may appear similar
Knowing: Making Minds Conscious and to our human discrimination, but has
Anil Seth’s Being You: A New Science of to do with particulars in the physical
Consciousness.

environment rather than conceptual Hegel 104). This is the nature of judg-
meanings. However aware and con- ment, the action by which thinking is
scious animals may be, theirs is not a conscious; for “to judge is to be aware
world that is conceptual and thus be- not only of what one is judging, but
yond the physicality of nature. The hu- that one is judging, asserting, claim-
man mind understands and navigates ing something,” to others or to oneself

both the world of physical objects and human realities that are perceived and brought to mind by our conceptual way of thinking, feeling, and engaging with purposefulness (or intentionality). The animals' engagement, at whatever level of consciousness it may be, is by way of biological needs, while human beings engage with a world, not a mere environment, with purposes and projects that reach beyond the biological.

An example can help illustrate the distinction. A horse, seeing an apple, moves to eat it: sensory information prompts a reaction. A human seeing the same apple may have a similar reactionary response, but can also engage in conceptual thinking. Thus, the sight of the apple reminds her of a trip to an orchard as a child, or of the threat of drought, or, by way of the story of Sir Isaac Newton, of the law of gravity. It leads to a decision to act in the world, by taking her children to an orchard, or limiting water waste in her household, or revisiting her university physics textbook.

The centrality of concepts to human thought also permits a self-awareness about our thinking that does not seem to be shared by the animal. As Hegel argued, human thought is about "cognizing the distinction of things" while "knowing and holding in mind what is (105). The human being can thus think about their own thoughts (and actions), holding them in mind and cognitively examining them in the same way as one can examine an external object.

Human beings also rely on more capacities of mind than sense perception and a memory of sensory information. 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms that the human capacities of imagination, thought, comprehension, and memory—along with "a common faculty . . . which mediates" between these capacities and the outer senses of perception—are spiritual powers, which seems to imply that they are different in kind from animal rationality (Some Answered Questions ch. 56). An element of this difference appears to be their holism.

Thus, Bahá'u'lláh likewise confirms that

> [s]pirit, mind, soul, and the powers of sight and hearing are but one single reality which hath manifold expressions owing to the diversity of its instruments. As thou dost observe, man's power to comprehend, move, speak, hear, and see all derive from this sign of his Lord within him. (Summons, "Suriy-i-Ra'is" ¶35)

McDowell seems to be driving at a

being distinguished" (qtd. in Pippin, the

inseparable cooperation of perception and conceptual thought, as noted earlier. He further points out that the conceptual nature of our thinking is only made possible by a "rationally organized network of capacities for active adjustment of one's thinking to the deliverances of experience" (Mind and World 29).

Andrea Kern follows McDowell's thinking about the conceptual nature of our rational capacity. In her important book, Sources of Knowledge: On the Concept of a Rational Capacity for Knowledge, she provides one way of understanding the above statement of Bahá'u'lláh on the "single reality" of "spirit, mind, soul, and the powers of sight and hearing." She, too, understands the rational capacity for knowledge as a single reality of mind and perception. While not referring

similar concept when he stresses the inseparable cooperation of our perceptions and our concepts: our beliefs, our standards for truth (or our standards of the right, the good, or the beautiful), any necessary background assumptions, and logic and syntax.

This reliance is seamless; while a person can analytically distinguish between the sight of a work of art, the aesthetic standard against which she appraises it, and the process by which the perception is measured against the standard, in actual experience there is no such distinguishing, supporting the contention that it is a "single reality" at work. Indeed, in making judgments we often rely on concepts, including the standard of truth by which we judge, without consciously bringing them to mind (Kern 182). This is a unique capacity for knowledge that combines at once perception, judgment, and

action,
to spirit or soul, she thus agrees with
Bahá’u’lláh’s idea that our rational
capacity seamlessly brings together
the conceptual mind and perceptions.
This seamless integration of capacities
enables us to further distinguish the hu-
man capacity for judgment. Kern elab-
orates on what it means to make a judg-
ment. Judgment—deeming something
true or untrue, correct or incorrect,
according to some standard of truth or
correctness—is always self-conscious,
in that our knowing something is also
being conscious of knowing something
(or sincerely believing that we do).8

along with an enormous amount of hu-
man learning.

This capacity for judgment has con-
tributed to a further unique feature, or
product, of the human mind. Human
beings have created a world through
the visual arts, architecture, music,
and crafts, as well as engineering and
infrastructure that strives to make the
world more beautiful. Our capacity
for judgment enables this creation, by
allowing us to judge proportion, scale,
and symmetry, to identify appropriate
metaphorical expressions, and to de-
cide on and assess art against aesthetic
ideals. Thus, it is important to com-
ment on the arts as a feature of culture

8 Or as Pippin puts it, “[j]udgment is the consciousness of judgment . . . There is not two acts, but one” (Hegel 105).

reshaping of its own environment in
ways that fall relatively short of the
human being’s efforts.

A final point on which McDowell
differentiates the animal and human

that likewise goes beyond the animal’s often more practical and sensible

demonstrated a capacity to re-imagine situations on some level; similar ca-
pacities can be seen elsewhere in the animal kingdom, as in certain birds.

While there is thus some evidence

for
mind is that we characterize all human beings as moral or immoral, but hardly ever conceive of animals in these terms. This position finds support in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reminder that while the scorpion may seem evil in relation to the human being, it is, in its own self, good (Some Answered Questions 74:5). This is not, on its face, an attribution of good (or bad) moral behavior to the scorpion, but an assertion of its ontological goodness as a creation of God. This is the sense of good and evil within which nature and animals can be assessed, and all in this sense are good in themselves, even if from our perspective they can cause bad outcomes for us. Only in the human realm is it meaningful to attribute good and evil to intentions and actions.

In A Natural History of Human Thinking, linguist and developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello summarizes much of the research regarding differences between the human mind and animal rationality. This research largely bears out the conceptual differences between animal and human world”

the great apes’ representation of the object world in simple abstract and causal, even intentional inferences in the mind, they are unable to adopt alternative perspectives. Tomasello summarizes how, unlike animals, human beings have:

> (1) the ability to cognitively represent experiences to oneself ‘offline’; (2) the ability to simulate or make inferences transforming those representations causally, intentionally, and/or logically; (3) the ability to self-monitor and evaluate how these simulated experiences might lead to specific behavioral outcomes . . . [or to undertake] (4) thoughtful behavioral decisions. (4)

These capacities at an individual level have an exponential impact when deployed at the level of the group, and give rise to human ways of being together that the more basic cognitive capacities of the great apes do not permit. In addition to the “shared

man minds outlined in the philosophy constructed by human language, as
above. Tomasello focuses in particular discussed below, the human ability
to
on the thinking of the great apes, wide- decenter our individual
perspective, to
ly considered to represent the apex of take neutral-agency perspectives,
ap-
non-human mental ability. These an- preciate the perspective of
others, and
imals, of course, do have prodigious coordinate action accordingly,
does not
capacities. In recent experiments, often find a strong correlate in the
great apes.
involving the use of tools, they have Any discussion of how
conceptual

thinking distinguishes humans from will support the argument, made
later
animals, particularly in its implications in the paper, that a philosophy of
mind
for coordination, necessarily requires that acknowledges the more-than-an-
consideration of language. However, imal capacities of the human mind,
before considering language in full, and rejects a reductionist
physicalist
which will have implications for how neuroscientific explanation of
these
the pursuit of scientific and religious capacities, need not reject out of
hand
knowledge shed light on the nature of the concept of the mind as an
essential-
mind, it will be helpful to explore some ly "supernatural" phenomenon.
This
further implications of the conceptual argument will be further developed
by
mind. considering the knowledge systems
of
science and religion in light of human
language.

P T : We can begin with Tomasello's in-
H C M L sight that the capacity of human
groups
to progressively build on advances in
L I culture (broadly speaking,
including
S -C A technology) is due to a fundamental
S C feature of human conceptual

thinking.

Having introduced key features of the human mind through contrast with animals, I want to specifically explore how the mind learns new ways of viewing the world. Such learning involves the multiple realities of cognition, feeling and purpose that the mind engages. Though the platform for such learning is always our own self-conscious awareness, it is important to emphasize to our inherently social nature as minded creatures. Both the self-referentiality and social embeddedness of learning highlight that the human mind, as discussed in the previous section, and operates in a world, not merely in an environment. This world is in fact constructed of many worlds, including our inner world and shared social worlds. All are built out of an architecture of concepts. The features explored here

Where animals can share a sensory environment, and use this sharing as the basis of cooperation, humans can achieve a different degree of cooperation thanks to our capacity to share a world of concepts:

> human beings construct an intersubjective world with others—shared but with differing perspectives . . . [this is] fundamental to human cooperative communication. (46)

Tomasello's insight into the cooperative structure of human teaching and learning by no means applies only to formal learning in the classroom. It is inherent in human learning from the very beginning, as demonstrated by human infants who master "joint attention" with mothers before speech

develops, allowing for the coordination of complex actions, and, as we mature, a "collective intentionality" with others. Joint attention, crucially, is more than two minds paying attention to the

infant mind, other minds, and the reality of an object world. Thus, even as the child learns about the object world by relying on others' first-person reactions towards, and expressiveness regarding,

same thing; it is paying attention with that world, they simultaneously learn
awareness that this attention is shared, the importance of emotions, meanings,
something that human infants are capa- and intentionality.
ble of in some form from a young age. No creature is as helpless, for as
While great apes demonstrate certain long, as the human infant. Those in-
characteristics of joint attention, these clined to see a design in the features of
do not continue to develop into the rich our existence might point out that it is
forms of collective intentionality that arguably our complete dependency on
unfold as the human child matures. other people and their reactions to us
“The idea that the human mind in its that enables us—indeed, requires is—
infant stages, as it were, looks at the to learn so early the foundation of hu-
physical world and tries to make sense man sociability: that others have minds
of it, is completely mythical . . . [O] and consciousness as we do. Obviously
ur first encounter with reality is an in the infant this is not yet self-con-
encounter with people” (Gabriel, Not sciousness, but the first glimmerings of
a Brain 37). Other people and their a world we wake up to over the years
minds have far greater impact on a ba- of our infancy as we learn a complex of
by’s growing awareness and conscious- feelings, purposes and thoughts that is
ness than the baby’s encounters with a extraordinarily vast. The human capac-
world of objects. Babies meet mother, ity to entertain multiple perspectives,
father, and significant others, and expe- for instance, which seems to elude the
rience their own consciousness by way great apes, begins to develop as early
of immediate relationships, mediated as between the ages of two and three.
by powerful gestures and enactments. The dependence of the human mind
Babies begin learning through differ- on social learning is exemplified by

ent social practices that are mindful, how we learn language. From his first
including with respect to the physi- word at twelve to eighteen months old,
cal world. The physical world takes the child acquires well over 10,000
shape within a baby's consciousness words by the age of six, while simul-
mediated by concepts, standards and taneously learning rules of syntax and
norms gleaned from other minds. The semantic usage that build to an enor-
baby, in effect, learns of the world (in mous complexity (Pinker)—and all
the expansive, more-than-environment this, as philosopher of mind and lan-
sense) in its mental features as much guage Donald Davidson emphasizes, is
as in its physical features, and does so done on very thin evidence and limited
by way of a triangulation between the experience. And it is not that one word

is uttered, then another, in an additive (Language 141) that allow human
process of learning; this is a process of beings to develop ideas of objectivity
gestures, actions, enactments between by way of a detachment from first-per-
mother and father and baby, that builds son consciousness to agent-neutral
a world of sense, a holistic picture, that perspectives. At a very early age, this
is grasped by the baby (Taylor, The enables the coordination of action by
Language Animal). "Mama" may be a "we-intentionality" among groups of
the "first word" uttered, but it is already human beings.10
embedded in a baby's understanding of In line with the highly cooperative
a whole world of previous interactive nature of the human mind, Charles
gesture and response that has been Sanders Peirce, the seminal pragmatist
growing in the mind of the baby. This philosopher, argues, as does Hegel,
allows the baby to begin utterances that it is a mistake to think of "belief as
in speech intimately tied to a world individual belief. Of course the beliefs

that is blossoming in the mind of the infant, a world where the sun comes up gradually, as it were, as the infant develops and learns. As Wittgenstein writes, “Light dawns gradually over the whole” (qtd. in McDowell, World 168). Wittgenstein brings into the picture the imaginative powers of the multiple language-games in which human beings become quickly adept across the many social practices of human reality.9 And, as philosophy now emphasizes, it is the sentence, not words themselves, that comprise meanings, facts and truths (the good, the right, and the beautiful).

Philosopher Charles Taylor, too, refers to the capacity of human infants to quickly acquire a capacity for “joint attention” with mothers and significant others, and notes the emergence of “the cultural conventions, norms and institutions, including language”

9 See Hans J. Schneider’s discussion of imagination and calculation in

of individuals are flawed; no individual mind is capable of an accurate and objective knowledge of reality” (qtd. in Menand 228). It is in the shared views of many minds that we come to know the world. This agrees with Davidson’s view that all members of the human race share far, far more conceptually than the small proportion of views on which we disagree.

It is always, of course, our own consciousness or mind, in the first-person, that serves as the only platform we have by which we engage the world.11

This first-person awareness comes first in any order of an explanation of reality. It is important to note that our

10 See “How Language Grows” in Taylor’s The Language Animal.

11 This discussion of the centrality of self-consciousness is largely inspired by the complementary views of Merlin Donald in A Mind so Rare, and Sebastian Rödl in Self-Consciousness and Objectivity. Merlin writes from the perspective of psychology and cognitive neuroscience; Rödl

self-conscious judgments are not simply subjective, although they can be. Our judgments about reality can approach objective reality to the extent that we have developed them in sound, cooperative social practices with other minds—discovering how others judge objective reality, learning how to think from others' perspectives as well as our own, bringing these multiple perspectives together according to standards or principles of truth that we have learned with respect to the object world, or by standards of the good, the right, or the beautiful, that we have learned by way of our ability to share others' perspectives in multiple social practices since infancy. We may have judgments we aren't sure of, or that are wrong, and those may be called subjective, but when we judge by standards or norms of truth using our rational capacity for knowledge, we judge objectively in

capture the experience of phenomena, which can only be known from the perspective of first-person consciousness.

A man who is entirely blind from birth will not understand and appreciate colors by finding out about brain processes in the visual cortex, or by listening to testimony from others. He has to experience color first-hand, a phenomenon in the mind that is simply not made existent by any "objective" description of the electro-magnetic spectrum.

Someone who is deaf cannot appreciate the impact in a hearing person's mind, whether by way of the mind's capacity for feeling, imagination, or cognition, of hearing Puccini's "Nessun Dorma," no matter how refined an understanding the deaf person has of sound waves and the relationship of the ear to the auditory regions of the brain. This is the nature of mind and consciousness, a feeling and mindedness that

refutes
the best way we know how. Objective knowledge, we then conclude, is a neutral, third-person judgment that comes after our first-person judgments. It is derivative of our first-person consciousness and rational faculty as we come to understand each other in our many first-person to first-person exchanges through life.

When we think of objective knowledge, we tend to privilege more formal, physical descriptions of phenomena. Such descriptions are, of course, powerful: being able to capture the operation of air currents in mathematical terms allows the human mind to design and refine flying machines. And yet such descriptions are utterly inadequate to

any and all physical explanations of the brain as a way to account for our conscious minds. Yet there are available to the blind or the deaf, conceptual translations—not qualitatively comparable in the sense of conscious appreciations—that do allow, nonetheless, sufficient shared conceptions to permit coordinated actions.

Thus, if our self-consciousness is the platform or space by which we make judgments and take actions, this has implications for the extent to which those judgments and actions can be studied, quantified, and explained from the outside. Our understandings are always internal understandings, and while they can be explained

derivatively by an external explanation, such an explanation is already less than the awareness of reality that we know by knowing our own minds. Indeed, an individual can arguably gain a better understanding of another's mind by the exercise of the simple, yet profound, human capacity to take multiple perspectives, than the researcher could obtain by even the most detailed descrip-

a concept, Hegel asked: How is it that concepts grasp our minds so firmly that they then limit our thought and reasoning.

Hegel's question provides a way of understanding an important passage of Bahá'u'lláh:

> To whatever heights the mind of the most exalted of men may soar,

tion of the workings of that person's brain. Just as we know ourselves from within, we can to some extent come to know another person's conscious sense of themselves, not through scientific measurement, but through intentional perspective-taking, aided by our interpretation of the other's expressive language and actions. We can, however roughly, know what the other feels and thinks because we can to some extent take their position, and feel and think it ourselves. And this, again, is a capacity only made possible by our own foundational self-consciousness.

Both of the facets of thinking and learning just discussed—the social and the self-conscious—have implications for how we make judgments about what is true or correct, how our thinking can go wrong, and how we can become aware of this and respond.

A genuine capacity for knowledge requires the ability to recognize that we can at times be wrong. Humans, of course, have this ability; yet, as Hegel pointed out, we often overlook the grip on our minds of concepts that are wrong and prevent sound thinking some

however great the depths which the detached and understanding heart can penetrate, such mind and heart can never transcend that which is the creature of their own conceptions and the product of their own thoughts. (Gleanings 148:1)

As we saw from McDowell, we take in the world by placing what we experience within the world of concepts we have construed over years of learning. Yet such learning may be seriously misinformed. Becoming aware of inconsistencies in the vast array of concepts that make up our world can prompt adjustments, as can learning new concepts or new relationships among existing concepts. However, while individuals can in this way correct some measure of error their thinking, our concepts and view of the world can also be changed gradually by sound social practices that involve shared perspectives and cooperation.

At the same time, Bahá'u'lláh points out limitations to which man's finite mind is strictly subjected. Where some

and reasoning. While Descartes had questioned the ways the mind grasps Mind, "the Power of the Human Spirit" kind of limitation which we can never overcome and which pertains to the actual workings of our own minds and the way in which the "rational faculty" (or soul) mediates the operation of the mind. Referring to the "rational faculty," Bahá'u'lláh says, T "S R ":

F ,C ,

Wert thou to ponder in thine heart, H M from now until the end that hath no end, and with all the concentrated intelligence and understanding which the greatest minds have attained in the past or will attain in the future, this divinely ordained and subtle Reality... thou wilt fail to comprehend its mystery or to appraise its virtue. (Gleanings 83:4)

Markus Gabriel may be identifying one aspect of this limitation on ever understanding the rational soul when he points to a limit in thought's ability to apprehend itself:

Because thinking is something real, the conditions of its emergence are not known to us in their

concepts can be changed over time by appropriate learning, there is another

25

unequivocally call upon us to always advance in our learning and our investigation of reality, which sometimes does require modifying firmly held, yet erroneous, concepts.

By what means, then, can the mind fulfill this mandate, given that our thoughts are vulnerable to error and bound by the limitations just described?

McDowell's discussion of "reasons" is helpful on this question:

[W]e make sense of rational relations between experience and judgment only in the context of an equation between the space of concepts and the space of reasons.

Thought can bear on empirical reality only because to be a thinker at all is to be at home in the space of reasons. (Mind and World 125)

The idea of a "space of reasons," as McDowell puts it, refers to the

ca-
entirety . . . how exactly a concrete thought process unfolds, is something it takes a further thought to grasp. No thought can catch itself in the act. (Meaning 217)

This limitation, of course, in no way absolves us from the responsibility to seek to increase our understanding within the limits imposed on it, and to identify and improve on errors in our understanding. The Bahá'í writings

pacities of mind by which we reason through the elements of that multiplicity of human realities: feelings, beliefs, attitudes, norms, memories, imagined counterfactuals or future possibilities, motivations, purposes, projects, and values. And if guided rightly, and with enough experience in sound social practices, we take on reasons that ad-
just the concepts we hold. We generate reasons for the intentions and purposes of actions we take; and when reflection

is required, we rely on higher values and meanings that override passing desires and idle preferences. The reasons supporting our intentions usually go well beyond our immediate experience. We rely on a conceptual shaping of our experience in order to perceive the world, and rely on our imagination informed by new concepts to consider possibilities that don't yet exist, but may with the right sort of actions.

And in our consideration of the multiple realities that make up our view of the world it is important to recall passages from Bahá'u'lláh's Writings

Bahá'u'lláh's request to us: "ponder in your hearts."13 The cognitive, the affective (or emotional), and the purposeful are all present in mind as a feature of our human agency, consciousness, freedom, and spontaneity within the constraints of the world we have in view and which underlies and prompts our perceptions, judgments, affirmations and actions.

Feelings are, in their own way, just as much evaluations of situations as cognitive thoughts are. Ronald de Sousa argues that we respond to the situations of life with emotions learned

during child-
where He refers to our “understanding hood or from literature and the arts.
heart,”12 alerting us to an understand- Such evaluations are judgments about
ing of the mind and heart as one. Our the world that rely on the mind. Robert
conceptual nature includes feelings, Pippin writes that “a rational capacity
emotions, attitudes and other sensibil- to take up the view of the other is based
ities. That we are self-conscious about on a deeper and more original affective
our feelings, often come to understand capacity” (Interanimations 133), while
them, and give them expression in lan- Rainer Forst writes, “Feelings are ex-
guage and gesture, provides evidence pressions of our beliefs and evalua-
that they can have just as much of a tions, not their opposite: someone who
conceptual hold on us as more cogni- did not have any moral feelings would
tive concepts do. For the mind is not not really be a participant in social,
simply cognitive or intellectual. The evaluating practices” (22).
mind thinks and judges with feelings as Here we see that the human mind is
well as beliefs, and with attitudes that no more reducible to an analogue of ar-
are themselves conceptual, for we know tificial intelligence than it is to the ani-
the object world as much as we know mal mind. Unlike artificial intelligence
the world of principles, purposes, norms that operates according to rules, terms
and standards, and the human situations and algorithms on only one logical
that enter into the judgments and actions level, our understanding of the world
by which we engage the world. is by way of concepts that operate on
There is little distance between different levels, including attitudes and
the heart and the head, as attested by feelings, purposes and projects.

12 See, amongst many, Gleanings 5:6,

13 See, for example, Gleanings

Gottlob Frege, who developed the first “concept script” that today serves as the basis of the digital revolution, is also credited with realizing that our human propositional judgements and utterances are always attached to attitude, normativity, and human agency. Markus Gabriel refers to Frege’s “colouring and shading” of thought, and the way in which feeling accompanies thought. “When we reflect on thinking itself, we also express attitudes” (Meaning 75).

While analytical philosophy has tended to reduce thoughts to mere propositions or assertoric sentences, Taylor, McDowell, Gabriel and Pippin, among others, emphasize how language is also constitutive, as new meanings and concepts are developed that make sense of ourselves and human life. Language not only depicts an object world, but creates and constitutes higher values and meanings that define human reality. A complete understanding of thought recognizes human agency, and accounts for the attitude and feeling involved in the commitments and responsibility we attach to thoughts and

capacity. To appreciate the uniqueness of thinking . . . even the concept of a capacity threatens to block one way to a full appreciation of the uniqueness of thinking” (16).

Bahá’u’lláh’s description of our “rational faculty” is important to these considerations. He describes the role of the rational faculty as fundamental to the agency of mind, whose instrumentalities can be understood to a degree even though its actual nature cannot be:

> Consider the rational faculty with which God hath endowed the essence of man. Examine thine own self, and behold how thy motion and stillness, thy will and purpose, thy sight and hearing, thy sense of smell and power of speech, and whatever else is related to, or transcendeth, thy physical senses or spiritual perceptions, all proceed from, and owe their existence to, this same faculty. (Gleanings 83:1)

In sum, while we inevitably must

judgments. It recognizes that thoughts involve different modalities—remembering, imagining, hoping, or asserting—and that we undertake thoughts with different levels of enthusiasm or detachment.

Irad Kimhi notes that "capacities for judgment, for language, for the deployment of logical words (such as "not" and "and") and for self-consciousness (and hence for the use of the word "I") . . . are all one and the same dissect the mind into distinct capacities in our efforts to understand it, and while there is also value in investigating correlations between features of the mind and particular brain areas or processes, this kind of analysis should not be allowed to obscure a fundamental truth about the mind, attested to by Bahá'u'lláh and recognized by the philosophers cited above: the human mind is not truly a composite of many parts, but a whole. While humanity will no

doubt continue to develop ever more sophisticated artificial systems that incorporate more features that we associate with the mind—some of them operating at levels beyond what is seen in humans—it seems unavoidable that these must always falls short of the holism that fundamentally characterizes a true human mind.

P T :
L S W

thoughts, values, and purposes that have current salience for the person reasoning, and then also uses language to forms intentions for actions. Donald Davidson writes that "language is not an ordinary learned skill; it is or has become a mode of perception . . . essential to the other senses if they are to yield propositional knowledge. Language is the organ of propositional perception" (Truth 135). An animal, or a human newborn, in other words, can sense raindrops on its body and react to them; a more mature human who feels

Having laid some groundwork by exploring correlations between philosophical understandings of the mind and its workings, and the picture of the human mind that emerges from the Bahá'í writings, I now return to the role of language in the human mind; this in turn will set the stage for a discussion of how science and religion shed light on, and can be better understood through, an adequate concept of mind.

Much of our conceptual capacity depends, of course, on language, which is comprised not only of words, but also of the gestures and enactments that accompany speech.[14] The relationship between the mind's perception and thought, and human action and engagement with the world, is inextricable, and it is mediated by language. The mind draws on language to reason through the desires, feelings, beliefs, goals, and introduces a dimension of strong values in our lives (33).

Language multiplies a thousandfold and more the combinations of the same raindrops can generate the knowledge, through language, that "it is raining."

Charles Taylor writes, too, of how language widens our perceptual capacities, and increases our range of thinking and feeling. Insofar as an object, an emotion, a value or purpose, stands out in our minds, it does so in the context of a whole situation, a world that we have in view and that we have constituted by way of a language we have learned. This world is built of concepts put together using the subject-predicate structure of language. Some features of the world are constructed from nonfigurative language—"the sky is blue"—and some from figurative language. Language then influences the way we perceive and take in the world (Language 93–94). Language gives us new feelings, new desires, new goals, new relationships, and introduces a dimension of strong values in our lives (33).

Language multiplies a thousandfold and more the combinations of

14 "Speech acts involve more than emitting the appropriate words. They also involve bodily action, stance, gesture, tone of voice, and the like" (Taylor, The

concepts
Language Animal 98).

available to the human mind. It allows us to theorize, to generate analogies and metaphors that connect concepts, and so influences how we perceive and understand a world beyond what is possible for the environmentally constrained animal. Its subject and predicate structure gives us a powerful way of combining properties and objects, abstractions and particulars, adding to capacities for logic we have developed since infancy. Language enables us to continually make judgments, relying on logical operators that we are not usually conscious of using—the logic of identity, non-contradiction, exclusions and inferences of the if-x-then-y sort.

The human being operates with vocabularies of tens of thousands of words, and intricate rules of syntax that we deploy without pause or thought. Even when we get words wrong, or mangle syntax, our common sense way of thinking allows us to understand than

us. We are able to translate each other’s languages, and even when differences in culture and linguistic usage create gaps in understanding, we can articulate those differences and gaps.[15]

The role of language in enabling, or constraining, our capacity to understand each other across linguistic and cultural barriers is contentious. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, for example, holds that our subjective views of the world are predominantly influenced by the languages we speak. As noted, Davidson argues that translation between languages goes far to mitigating the inherent irreducibility of these subjective views. At the same time, of course, different languages do create different ways of taking in and seeing the world. Yet the point made by Davidson, as well as Taylor, is that there is far more overlap between human beings’ worlds than there is difference; or, in other words, that our shared world is greater

each others' utterances. Indeed, the capacity of language to enable communication between minds is remarkable for its flexibility. As Davidson has argued, we rely on an enormous set of interrelated concepts that are shared universally by all human beings, the majority of which were developed in infancy, childhood and adolescence. This has always, through history, allowed human beings to meet and converse across widely different languages and cultures, employing Davidson's "principle of charity" by which we assume that other humans are rational beings navigating the same world as lost in translation: the idea of a shared world should not lead us to conclude that there are no functional differences between languages, or to imagine that a language can be learned mechanically without reference to its cultural context and distinctive characteristics. But those worlds that are unique to each culture, linguistic group, or (ultimately) individual. Translation relies on this extensive shared world of human beings, and conceptual differences between particular languages represent only a portion of the enormity of conceptual reality that all human beings share.16 Of course, something is always

15 See Davidson's Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective and also his Truth, Language and History.

16 See Taylor's critique of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in chapter 9 of The Language Animal. Tomasello, as noted above, makes a similar point in arguing this language generation is not, as it is for the AI, a sophisticated recombination of words and phrases according to rules generated inductively through the analysis of thousands or millions of texts. For the human, language generation is bound up with meaning.

the point remains that the phenomenon of language, as a whole, is enabling of a collective life for the human race that other species do not have access to. Thus, where similar animals in the same place at a given time can share a sensory environment, humans can, through language, share a world across time, space, culture, etc. And, largely through language, humans can collectively expand and refine the conceptual landscape of that world, leading to developments in culture.

As with the human mind's way of learning, its reliance on language has implications not only for the world we share with others, but for our inner world. Human use of language differs in important respects from the computer's use of language, not least in that a human's use of language is intimately bound up with the human agent's own self-understanding, and cannot be properly considered without

Figurative language and new and novel expressiveness in turn influence the birth of new aspirations, projects and purposes. They give us ways of perception beyond the surface of things. Our discursive activity, our conversations with others, set up new relationships, redefining previous understandings.

This capacity of language to shape and direct our inner world is particularly powerful when we use language to grapple with things beyond the concrete. Davidson writes persuasively that we have two languages, one relative to the physical realm, and one that is about the mental realm. Taylor, in turn, refers to the former as "designative," while the latter is only sometimes designative, and often "constitutive." Where designative language assigns relationships between objects or concepts that require little or no interpretation—"the ball is round"—constitutive

language
reference to this. Humans are language
generators; we are constantly combin- to twenty-five words is passed, “almost
ing words, and the concepts they per- every sentence uttered by an adult native
tain to, in new and original ways.17 And speaker is a novel sentence. It is new . . .
in the sense that no one in the history of
that advances in human civilizations de- the world has ever heard exactly that string
pend upon humans’ shared grasp of a con- of words before . . . This is an observation
ceptual reality, including across linguistic that has been empirically verified over and
divides. over again by examining large corpora,
17 Consider Noam Chomsky’s ob- transcribing actual conversations, and so
servation that once a threshold of twenty on” (Brandom, A Spirit of Trust 520).
Mind, “the Power of the Human Spirit” 31

requires interpretation and a less deter- them in terms of sensible things
minate grasp on such matters as feel- . . . For example, [for] grief and
ings and attitudes, values and norms. happiness . . . you say, “My heart
We use these two languages—neither became heavy”, or “My heart was
of which, Davidson argues, can be uplifted”, although one’s heart is
translated into the other—without not literally made heavy or lifted
pause or deep reflection, in conversa- up. (Some Answered Questions
tion and in how we go about our lives. 16:1–4)
‘Abdu’l-Bahá seems to agree with
both Taylor and Davidson when He The existence of this second lan-
explains that “human knowledge is of guage pertaining to the mental realm,
two kinds”: and the inextricable influence of lan-
guage on our inner condition, point
One is the knowledge acquired to a hard limit on the extent to which
through the senses. That which any human mind can be fully described

the eye, the ear, or the senses of smell, taste, or touch can perceive is called "sensible". . . . These are called sensible realities.

The other kind of human knowledge is that of intelligible things; that is, it consists of intelligible realities which have no outward form or place and which are not sensible. For example, the 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. For the ear does not hear these realities, the eye does not see them . . . . But when you undertake to express these intelligible realities, you have no recourse but to cast them in the mold of the sensible, for outwardly there is nothing beyond the sensible. Thus, when you wish to express the reality of the spirit and its conditions and degrees, you are obliged to describe

from the external, objectivizing stance of neuroscience. However precisely neuroscience might map out the synaptic correlates to a person's realization that "my heart is heavy," this description will never capture the essence of the feeling thus described. Gabriel summarizes the issue well:

> Our self-conception . . . reflects our value system and our personal experience . . . It has developed in complex ways, in the tension between our understanding of nature, literature, legal systems, values of justice, our arts, religions, socio-historical and personal experience. There just is no way to describe these developments in the language of neuroscience that would be superior or even equal to the vocabulary [that we have] already at hand. (Not a Brain 15)

In the closing sections of this paper, I look first at how language and the mind operate in natural science, a language Davidson characterizes as of the physical realm, Taylor as the designative. I will then look at the language of Revelation, which addresses both the physical realm and the mental realm—the designative and the constimeasured. Scientists will often advance the ways we perceive the world by relying first on metaphor and analogy with reference to the concrete and sensible in order to hypothesize about possible undiscovered causal mechanisms. Once the hypothesis is

tested,
tutive—and how both languages relate and phenomena are observed through
to the material and the spiritual aspects elaborate instrumentation, analogy can
of reality. remain useful in understanding what
has been observed; only later are such
analogies articulated into more formal
P F : theory. Consider, for example, how
S non-intuitive findings of physics in the
twentieth century at both the relativis-
We think of science as proceeding by tic and quantum scales almost demand
way of designation, description, and to be understood through metaphor
explanation of physical and natural and analogy before the student can
causality, and there is validity to this: undertake to comprehend them more
at a certain point in the process by formally.
which human minds investigate natural The process by which science ad-
phenomena using the tools of science, vances through metaphors and anal-
discoveries are framed in this kind of ogies has been labelled "abduction"
language. In some scientific domains, by Charles S. Peirce.18 Abduction in-
as in physics, this designative language volves a way of thinking that relies on
can even be crystallized into mathe- highly focused observation, but also
matics. However, if we focus only on on imagination and a general intelli-
these outcomes of scientific activity, gence. This is a capacity of the human
framed in this particular kind of lan- mind beyond inductive and deductive
guage, we end up missing the full rich- reasoning whereby scientists eliminate
ness of the mental processes by which fanciful theories and mere superstition
human minds engage in science. by deepening their experience with,
It is noteworthy, for instance, that and intuitive understanding of, the phe-
the human ability to "cast" intelligible nomena at hand.19 This exploration in
realities into the "mold of the sensi-
ble" highlighted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá is 18 For an informative summary, see
vital to the pursuit of science as well. Igor Douven's "Peirce on Abduction."
Whatever is undiscovered in a giv- 19 Peter Godfrey-Smith

explains
en process of natural causality is, in a certain sense, insensible: it has not yet been made accessible to us to be explained. (58)

So powerful and consequential is this capacity of the soul to discover realities beneath what is immediately sensible that, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stresses, it must be understood as an essentially supernatural capacity:

> The virtues of humanity are many, but science is the most noble of

abduction as “inference to the best explanation” in Theory and Reality, and as a way of eliminating other possible explanations. Imre Lakatos writes about scientific

depth, beyond the surface observation of the everyday world, is necessary, as Francis Bacon wrote at the dawn of modern science, since:

> the greatest hindrance and aberration of the human understanding proceeds from the dullness, incompetency and deceptions of the senses; in that things which strike the senses outweigh things which do not immediately strike it, though they may be more important. Hence it is that speculation commonly ceases where sight ceases; insomuch that of things invisible there is little or no observation. (58)

Insights that come from intense investigation provide clues that lead to theories that advance science. Such insights emerge through the mind’s capacity to associate disparate things and find connections and resonance, to make imaginative leaps. Thus, however much knowledge is ultimately

below the surface of the ordinary perceptual world. This is stressed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His discussion of the role and power of the soul in scientific discovery:

> Through the power of the rational soul, man can discover the realities of things, comprehend their properties, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All the sciences, branches of learning, arts, inventions, institutions, undertakings, and discoveries have resulted from the comprehension of the rational soul. (Some Answered Questions 58:3)

this capacity of the soul to discover realities beneath what is immediately sensible that, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stresses, it must be understood as an essentially supernatural capacity:

> The virtues of humanity are many, but science is the most noble of

captured in science by designation and explanation, the mind has capacities for generating knowledge that do not operate by simple induction (in the way an artificial intelligence generates "knowledge" inductively from large data sets, for instance).

Scientific investigation thus involves looking into phenomena in order to discover entities and forces research programs that showed promise or decline as a way of then formulating theory that was plausible, in For and against Method.

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. All the powers and attributes of man are human and hereditary in origin—outcomes of nature's processes—except the intellect, which is supernatural . . . The power of intellectual investigation and scientific acquisition is a higher virtue specialized to man alone. (Promulgation 20:2)

The implications of this characterization of the mind and scientific inquiry for philosophy will be considered later. For the present, we can consider how the human mind's capacity for scientific investigation sheds light on the distinctiveness of the phenomenon of mind itself (whether or not one sees in this distinctiveness evidence of a spiritual or "supernatural" essence to the mind). Indeed, it seems plausible that the way the mind undertakes science may not be reproducible in, for instance, artificial intelligence systems.

approach. Until recently, histories of scientific advance neglected the role of haphazard inventions, innovations, and advances that were initially disconnected from theory.21 As Thomas Kuhn notes, scientists develop ways of seeing particular domains of reality by way of a kind of sixth sense or an intuitive grasp arising from their absorption in scientific practice. There are few better explanations of this than the book on scientist Barbara McClintock, A Feeling for the Organism. Author Evelyn Fox Keller describes the

(often
As noted earlier, scientific advances overlooked) contributions McClintock
rely on not only inductive and deduc- made to ecological and genetic
science
tive reasoning, but also on abductive thanks to how she came to
“see” phe-
reasoning or “general intelligence.” nomena, a kind of vision
arising out of
The role of general intelligence in her absorption and dedication to
sound
particular demonstrates the futility of scientific practices. Einstein
felt that,
efforts to model scientific practice on “only intuition, resting on
sympathetic
a series of technical steps, or to reduce understanding, can lead [to
discovery
it to an algorithm. As Hilary Putnam of new laws], . . . daily effort
comes
writes, “there is no such thing as the from no deliberate intention or
pro-
scientific method” (72). This is not gram, but straight from the
heart” (qtd.
only due to the diversity of methods in Keller 201).
within science, which range from clas- The crucial role of intuitive
under-
sification and taxonomies, to mathe- standing in science does not seem
to
matical methods and computer simula- be one that artificial
intelligence, as it
tions, and from laboratory experiments is currently being developed, can
take
involving ever more elaborate instru- on. While AI may serve as a tool
of
mentation and measurement approach- immense power for researchers,
there
es to speculative cosmological theory.20 seem to be core aspects of the
activity
More fundamentally, the idea of “the” of science that the human mind
alone
scientific method is misleading because can undertake. An increasing
number
the crucial role of general intelligence of articles and books now note how
is simply not reducible to a formulaic efforts in artificial intelligence
have
failed to model “general intelligence.”

20 See Ian Hacking’s work paper, “Finding Out: Prolegomena to a Theory

of Truthfulness and Reasoning in the Sciences."

21 See Stephen Gaukroger, Civilization and the Culture of Science.

Mind, "the Power of the Human Spirit"

35

In The Myth of Artificial Intelligence: Why Computers Can't Think Like We Do, Erik J. Larson points out that the enormous funds given to AI research, which continues to rely on the inductive processing of large data sets, displace funding for more effective scientific research that includes deductive as well as abductive reasoning. Artificial intelligence's reliance on inductive modelling alone allows it to discover correlations, but provides few insights into causality; AI's lack of understanding of underlying causes makes it error prone with respect to specific cases (even before considering the often biased and subjective rules and algorithms that AI programmers write into their programs). Our efforts to develop this kind of "intelligence" have not yet discovered the path to enabling AI to develop a genuine scientific understanding of deeper forces, and causal connections at work.

Comments by Rebecca Golden of the Genetic Literacy Project are enough to show the potentially insurmountable problems jointly faced by AI researchers hoping to reproduce the functioning

trillion neuronal synapses—so a computer recording a simple binary piece of information . . . would require 100 terabytes. The amount of storage needed to store even this very simple information every second over the course of one day for one person would be more than 100,000 terabytes, or 100 petabytes. Supercomputers these days hold about 10 petabytes. And this quick calculation doesn't account for the changes in connectivity and positioning of these synapses occurring over time. Counting how these connections change just after a good night's sleep or a class in mathematics amounts to . . . many more bytes than the estimated atoms in the universe. The wiring problem seems intractable in its magnitude. (qtd. in Larson 250)

It would seem that just as animal cognition is an inadequate model for understanding the human mind, artificial intelligence is not a convincing model for our own capacity for thought;

and
of the human brain, and neuroscientists who hope to model the human brain, or ever understand the mind completely:

The human brain is estimated to have approximately 86 billion neurons, each neuron with possibly tens of thousands of synaptic connections; these little conversation sites are where neurons exchange information. In total, there are likely to be more than a hundred

perhaps our efforts to make AI in the image of our own minds are destined for failure. Just as a thought, in Gabriel's words, cannot "catch itself in the act," the mind cannot fathom itself. This is attested to in the Bahá'í writings, and is coherent with an understanding whereby the mind is an essentially spiritual phenomenon. We will explore this further later, but it helpfully leads us to the broader point that science cannot fully describe the world.

It is a principle of science that evidence always underdetermines theory. Evidence, in other words, can always support different theories, as Kuhn emphasizes. That is why science is so intent on gaining ever more evidence in order to endlessly adjust theory. We never have complete evidence as there is always more to learn and know, and theory is likewise always open to adjustments, if not outright paradigm shifts.

Our scientific theories, then, can

Bahá'í writings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the concept of "nature itself" is "not a sensible reality," but an ideal, an abstraction (Some Answered Question 16:3). Bahá'u'lláh likewise confirms that we will never have a total explanation of the natural world:

> Say: Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator. Its manifestations are diversified by varying causes, and in this diversity there

never be total descriptions of reality.[22] Mathematician and philosopher John Myhill summarizes this well: "There is no nonpoetical description of the whole of reality" (qtd. in W. Hatcher 11).[23] This view is consonant with the

[22] Quantum mechanics has also been used to demonstrate science inability to arrive at a total description of nature, since it understands the physical world at the subatomic level as a matter of probabilities only, not strict causality. For a recent discussion, see Vahid Ranjbar's "The Quantum State Function, Platonic Forms, and the Ethereal Substance."

[23] This conclusion is based on Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, confirmed by the Hilbert Space model of quantum mechanics, and reinforced by the mathematician Gödel's incompleteness theory which proves that no axiomatic system, even basic arithmetic, can ensure both completeness and consistency. If a model of basic arithmetic can only be complete if it is inconsistent, or consistent if it is incomplete, we can be sure there will never be a

are signs for men of discernment.

. . . It is endowed with a power whose reality men of learning fail to grasp. Indeed a man of insight can perceive naught therein save the effulgent splendor of Our Name, the Creator. (Tablets, Lawh-i-Hikmat ¶14)

This perspective returns a measure of enchantment to nature and confirms Myhill's suggestion that poetry—and, we might add, perhaps most especially the divine poetry of Revelation—provides the only total view of reality.

P F :
T L R

Having briefly considered how the mind generates scientific knowledge, as well as the limits of the mind's scientific pursuit in understanding the totality of reality, I now turn to the question of

use of Gödel's theory in demonstrating the

total understanding of the physical realm.

See physicist Roger Penrose's Shadows of the Mind, especially with respect to his Mind, "the Power of the Human Spirit"

of what religion, and Revelation, can tell us about the mind. Where science aims at a determinate knowledge of entities and forces across well-defined domains of phenomena in its multiple sub-fields, the language of Revelation encompasses determinate and indeterminate knowledge, and experience of realities both physical and natural as well as spiritual and beyond nature.[24]

Before considering what the phenomenon of Revelation might tell us about the mind, it may be helpful to say a few preliminary words about the phenomenon of art, and its relation to religion. The reason for this is that some of the capacities of the human mind to know and experience reality transcend intellectual or cognitive apprehension. The mind, as noted above, has capacities for feeling, for moral

difference between mind and brain, and William Hatcher's Minimalism (11) for references to these same ideas.

view of the mind, as it highlights the mind's capacity for astonishment and awe, perplexity and puzzlement in our encounter with aesthetically stirring phenomena. This capacity is equally—or perhaps even more powerfully—engaged as the mind tries to understand the contingencies and mysteries of ordinary human life, and to contemplate being and reality.

Common to art and Revelation is concern with meaning, and a reliance on metaphor as a means of expressing the inexpressible. Like philosophy—and unlike science considered in isolation—religion and much of art intentionally explore meaning and the purpose of life. The pursuit of meaning can, of course, be a legitimate source of understanding and wisdom, and therefore a particular kind of

knowl-
and purposeful action, and also for aes- edge, distinct from the knowledge gen-
thetic perception and expression. Art, erated by science. In her book The Life
as an element of human civilization, of the Mind, Hannah Arendt explores
has long justified a more capacious how western philosophy emerged in
the Greek world largely as a matter of
wonder, in the pursuit of understand-
24 See Hatcher's Minimalism for a ing at the level of meaning. In this
discussion of the distinct purpose and na-
pursuit, Greek philosophers, including
ture of scientific language and the language
Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, encoun-
of Revelation. I had the good fortune to
know Hatcher, and learned a great deal
tered the problem of the ineffable—or
from our many conversations. Important- that which cannot be put into language.
ly, he points out that the ways of knowing Arendt notes that Plato was often reluc-
fostered by each are complementary—one tant to put his views in writing, and that
does not supersede the other: "intuition and Aristotle wrote of "truth that refused to
mysticism may give rise to transrational be expressed in discourse" (114). For
modes of knowing reality . . . [but neither] these philosophers, as well as later
divine revelation or mysticism can contra- thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger,
dict the conclusions of reason in the face and Wittgenstein, who ran up against
of the same information base . . . there is the limits of language, metaphor as-
a fundamental difference between . . . the sumed a central role in their attempts
transrational and the irrational" (114).

to convey knowledge about questions garden of these inner meanings,
of meaning. Art and Revelation have, thou shalt never taste of the im-
of course, similarly relied on metaphor perishable wine of this valley. And
to express the ineffable. The examples shouldst thou taste of it, thou

wilt
of this phenomenon in the Writings turn away from all else and drink
of Bahá'u'lláh are too numerous to of the cup of contentment. .
. .
count; we might consider one example (Call ¶¶ 63–64)
from The Seven Valleys in which He
simultaneously explicitly speaks of the In this short paper, I am forced
to
ineffability of spiritual meanings that set aside an exploration of the
world
language is powerless to convey, em- of art and its different modalities
of
ploys metaphor to provide a glimpse of language and expression, modali-
what lies beyond the veil of the ineffa- ties that engage the capacities of
the
ble, and uses art—specifically the po- mind to know and experience reality
etry of 'Attár and Ibn-i-Fárid—to help in an aesthetic and
sensible way that
the reader understand what cannot be is less determinate than the knowing
grasped cognitively: produced by science. Art brings a
measure of indetermination and won-
The tongue faileth in describing der to our perception and knowledge
these three valleys, and speech of the world. Through the arts we
falleth short. The pen steppeth expand the powers by which we are
not into this arena, the ink leaveth able to bring alternative perspectives
only a blot. In these stations, the into view, and we develop our sense
nightingale of the heart hath oth- of a world that transcends the mere
er songs and secrets, which make physical by way of evaluations and
the heart to leap and the soul to reactions that are emotional as well
cry out, but this mystery of inner as cognitive. This growth in perspec-
meaning may be whispered only tives is not limited to our interaction
from heart to heart, and confided with art itself; as de Sousa empha-
only from breast to breast. sizes, we often then shift those emo-
The bliss of mystic know- tional evaluations into the situations
ers can be only told from heart to of human life. The arts thus help us
heart, to see the world in new ways.
A bliss no messenger can If this is true of the arts, how much
bear and no missive dare impart. more is it true of the language of
divine
How many are the matters I Revelation, a form of language that
have out of weakness left unsaid; looks beyond the causal and habitu-
For my words would fail to al perceptions and realities of human
reckon them and mine every effort conceptuality, and aims to advance the
would fall short. mind's grasp of realities that
include,
O friend, till thou enter the but also transcend, the physical and

natural world.25 I turn to Revelation and its language now, drawing on arguments from within philosophy itself to support the view that religious language— especially that of the most recent Revelation—allows unique access to certain ways of knowing.26

If human agency, or the power of the human spirit, is beyond physical determinations and descriptions of brain physicality, as many philosophers claim, then it may be worth asking if we might find a better resolution to the challenge of understanding the mind by relying on the concept of the rational soul and the power of the human spirit.

As a path to bringing those ideas back into philosophical discourse, we might first investigate the capacity of the mind to know and engage with the language of divine Revelation. Such investigation can lead us to value this language with religious practice . . . [and] throws

of Revelation as a way by which human beings can navigate the contingencies of human affairs, and develop their capacity for cooperation, collective intentions and coordinated reaction—features that are unique to the human mind as philosophy itself has argued.

Before considering how Revelation might shed light on the mind itself, let us consider in more depth how it contributes uniquely to our ways of knowing in general. On the matter of religion, no less a secular philosopher than Jürgen Habermas has written,

> [R]eligion, which has largely been deprived of its worldview functions, is still indispensable in ordinary life for normalizing intercourse with the extraordinary. For this reason, even postmetaphysical thinking continues to coexist with

25 Indeed, the Báb explains that some of the power of art may come from its ability to tap into the same source that gives Revelation its force: "It is the impostmeta-

light on a curious dependence of philosophy that has forfeited its contact with the extraordinary.

Philosophy, even in its impostmeta-

mediate influence of the Holy Spirit that neither causes words . . . from the tongue of poets, to replace nor repress religion as the significance of which they themselves long as religious language is the are oftentimes unable to apprehend" (qtd. in Nábil-i-A'zam 259) bearer of a semantic content that

26 Of course, as a believer in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, I consider His Writings, and those of the Báb, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice as truths and guidance that transcend the arguments and positions of philosophers. At the same time, I recognize the need to advance the discourse in philosophy around the existence of an "extended reality" beyond the merely material.

is inspiring and even indispensable, for this content eludes . . . the explanatory force of philosophical language and continues to resist translation into reasoning discourses. (Postmetaphysical Thinking 51)

. . . philosophy has itself fostered a kind of cognitivist reduction and

has pinned reason down to only one of its dimensions, . . . the truth of assertoric sentences . . . pursuing truth is the only thing that still counts as rational. Questions of justice and questions of taste, as well as questions regarding the truthful presentation of self, are all excluded from the sphere of the rational. (49–50)

than that of science. It brings to mind astonishment and solace, peace and insight. It prompts in the self-consciousness of mind an awareness of a larger sense of being and purposefulness than arises in the mere attending to the practical matters of physical survival. The language of Revelation conveys a sense of grace and contentment, but also inspires determination and perseverance; it opens for those who take such language seriously a form of knowledge that helps meet

The questions Habermas refers to are reflected in the content of much re-

ligious language, just as religious language also addresses the capacities of feeling and purposefulness which many philosophers emphasize as central to an understanding of the mind. Habermas explains, too, that ordinary life is by no means “immune to the shattering and subversive intrusion of extraordinary events” (Postmetaphysical Thinking 51). Revelation speaks directly to the tragedies and crises facing humanity, providing a context for the mind to grapple with death itself, and with the appalling levels of personal suffering that exist in the world; yet even in confronting these areas of human experience that have so troubled human thought across history, religious language can inspire a sense of astonishment, awe and beauty, and bring about epiphanies, heightened excitement, love, and joy.

The language of divine Revelation provides a source of inspiration and

everyday life even as it provides a worldview beyond the particulars of ordinary life.

This is a language that encompasses both the descriptive and the figurative or constitutive. Thus, the language of divine Revelation expresses determinate guidance, in specific laws, and well-defined principles and values; yet it also involves a way of knowing and experiencing life and the mystery of being itself. it. It conveys more general and sometimes indeterminate expressions of aspirations and noble goals that lead to different interpretations, and does so in a language that speaks to young and old, the humble or sophisticated, with an expression that can be understood by all. These two qualities of language together capture realities of truth, goodness and beauty, enabling the mind to gain an awareness and, to some extent, understanding of both its immediate reality and an extended, in-

guidance that widens the ways by which the mind can know and experience the world. It is a language that is more expansive, and often less determinate, in Bahá'u'lláh points out, are often "too

finite reality that lies just beyond the horizon of our finite and humble lives.

Genuine religious language thus takes advantage of the mind's

composite of capacities and ways of knowing and experiencing the world, through thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and purposes. The mind relies on these capacities seamlessly, adjusting flexibly to different contexts, but it is always able to be inspired and guided by noble values and principles that, over successive Revelations from God, human beings have gradually come to understand. Exposed to such language, whether in the form of the Sermon on the Mount, the verses of the Qur'án, or the speeches attributed to the Buddha, human beings gain insights that have allowed them to overcome and transcend the contingencies of life and providence—contingencies that, as

the time of the Buddha, the emergence of Greek thought, and the Revelation of the Old Testament, through to the Revelations of Christ and up to that of Muhammad—have begun to document the ways religion stimulated the advance of human capacities of thought, feeling, and purpose. Bellah details impacts of religion on the evolution of the mind before and during the Axial Age, arguing that religion was the impulse behind significant shifts in the cognitive independence of the human mind.28 Jaspers, for his part, wrote that the Axial Age formed "the spiritual foundations of humanity . . . foundations on which humanity still subsists today" (qtd. in Nirenberg and Nirenberg 98). This

scholarship
mysterious for the mind of man to comprehend" on a cognitive level (Kitáb-i-Íqán 167).27

While this developmental effect of Revelation on the mind can be attested to by the individual, its effects can also be seen from a historical perspective. Scholars such as Robert Bellah, building on Karl Jaspers' concept of the Axial Age—a period of cultural ferment measured variously from around

27 Bahá'u'lláh's own language of Revelation consists of an enormous body of Writings of equally enormous range. He provides a practical vision of human purpose and relationship, inviting all the members of the human race to live in "the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship," and assures us that unity, cooperation and love among the peoples of the world that "can illuminate the whole earth" (Gleanings 132:3).

demonstrates a powerful relationship between religion, the human mind and the advance of human civilization. It does so by understanding religion as a general institution throughout history, rather than focusing on specific faith communities or religious labels that are often weighed down by dogma and clerical interpretations that cloud the originality of genuine Revelation language. Viewed in this perspective, history testifies to the impact of religion on human civilization with respect to culture, rationality, morality and language itself.

We can reflect, in light of this view of religion, on the importance of

28 In addition to Bellah's works Religion in Human Evolution and The Axial Age and Its Consequences, see also Ben Schewel's Seven Ways of Looking at Religion.

Revelation to the process of learning that Tomasello refers to as "the ratchet

knowledge and learning, we could broaden and deepen a shared view of

effect" by which "cumulative cultural evolution" occurs in the "social learning" of humanity. Tomasello views the human mind's cooperative nature (discussed earlier in this paper) as arguably its essential quality. Habermas' prodigious philosophical work reflects the same idea: human beings advance by a process of social reasoning in which minds are engaged cooperatively and communicatively in unending conversations that touch contexts of affectivity, cognition, and purposefulness, in an ongoing assessment of the consequences of our actions with a view to establishing better reasons for subsequent and better coordinated action.

Yet, even if the Axial Age provides abundant evidence of the historical role of the language of Revelation in fostering this fundamental human capacity for cumulative cultural development through cooperation, can it fulfill the same function today? Humanity faces enormous challenges: environ-

the world in both its physical and spiritual dimensions. This would mean expanding and deepening our perception of social reality, refining our powers of judgement, and elevating the meaning and purpose of our lives.

Here I would like to suggest how, given what we have reviewed about the nature of learning in a social context, the role of language in the mind, and the particular attributes of the language of Revelation, a certain kind of "religious" practice might be considered as a powerful tool for humanity to resolve the challenges it faces. The example provided—the social practices prompted by Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and elucidated by the Universal House of Justice—may not look like most people's idea of a religious practice. But it is, I would argue, a practice that both relies on the capacity of Revelation to engage the human mind in a unique way, and takes advantage of the nature of social learning. It

is a kind
mental harm, gross inequities across of practice, in short, that can give the
and within countries, racism, preju- observer a reason to have confidence
dices and injustices that cause appall- in the human mind's ability to generate
ing suffering to many, to name a few. the collective intentionality and action
These challenges represent an evident needed to resolve the crises it faces.
failure of human solidarity. Despite an It provides evidence of the power and
understanding of the human mind as enormous influence that Revelation
uniquely designed for cooperation and can have on the processes of mind in its
for collective intentionality, we seem learning to build better, more peaceful
to be falling short of the minimal level and prosperous communities.
of cooperation demanded by the exi- Over the past twenty-five years, the
gencies of our times. With a renewed Bahá'í community has been engaged in
confidence in the power of the human a collective, worldwide learning pro-
mind and its capacity for cooperation, cess, relying on an evolving conceptual

framework detailed in a series of let- with newer, better ways of viewing the
ters of the Universal House of Justice. world. With continued study of the lan-
The process of learning has centered guage of Revelation, and with efforts
on a systematic educational program to apply its guidance through action,
involving study circles for adults, ju- our perceptions widen, deepen, and are
nior youth empowerment programs, enriched.
and children's classes. This program This systematic process promotes
of education involves study of the lan- in its participants a deeper appreciа-
guage of Revelation and authorized tion of the language of the Revelation
interpretations, embedded in extensive of Bahá'u'lláh, whether one

believes
conversation and discussion, as well as that He is a Manifestation of God or
social practices undertaken by partici- thinks of Him merely as one more
pants. This process encourages efforts among many educators and teachers of
to generate a collective intentionality humanity whose language and ways of
that then allows for coordinated action expression make sense, are coherent,
characterized by creativity and imagi- and are also stimulating and encour-
nation. Participants learn to apply the aging. As all divine Revelations have
guidance studied, and then reflect and done, Bahá'u'lláh's both elucidates
converse together about such actions the spiritual aspects of life and out-
and their consequences. This serves lines a more appropriate relationship
to stimulate advances in both individ- to the material aspects of reality. In
ual and collective learning among the language that is at once figurative and
participants, whether Bahá'í adherents, informative, explicit and explanatory,
their friends, families or neighbors.29 the Revelation addresses and activates
This process emphasizes both cog- those human realities of purposeful ac-
nitive learning and the development of tion, thought and feeling.
spiritual qualities, including attitudes, The impacts of the language of
feelings, aspirations, and noble goals Revelation through the learning pro-
and purposes. It relies on appropriate cess described above are thus not mea-
kinds of social practices that involve sured in external outcomes alone. In
action accompanied by others. This this shared and cooperative enterprise
is learning by doing, as described by of learning, there is an emphasis on
Aristotle in his Nicomachean Ethics: standards of the right and the good.
"For the things we have to learn be- There is an assumption of the nobility
fore we can do, we learn by doing" of those who participate in the learning

(qtd. in Kern 259). We take actions and aspirations we learn, replacing mistaken concepts service, sacrifice, nobility, and positive action.

29 For a philosophical analysis of this educational process, see Sona Farid-Arbab's Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy.

process, which stimulates to attain to higher levels of

The mind's self-understanding and its inextricable sociality mutually reinforce each other, as the personal drive

to surpass one's previous self-understanding is simultaneously a drive to contribute to greater social cohesion and unity among all who participate.

This may be understood as a process of self-transendence as described by philosopher William Desmond:

> Religious community binds together the human and the divine, and out of this it transforms the bonds holding humans together. The sources of social power undergo a transformation that carries human power to the edge of humanness. We understand power as given all along, a gift from motiveless generosity, motiveless goodness beyond the goodness of the gift, rousing in community the vision of humans living together

as protagonists in the development of new ways of life.

Central to this kind of development is growth in the mind's capacity to understand reality. Beyond a more informed reading of the reality of both the material and spiritual nature of villages, towns, and city neighborhoods, participants learn to perceive and penetrate social reality at a deeper level.

This process involves a re-evaluation of the standards we rely on in our judgments of others, of the truth, the good, the right, and the beautiful. There is as much to learn from false starts and mistakes as there is from positive experiences. For it is not only the concepts that come most quickly to mind that hold us in their grasp, and from which we try to shake free, but deeper, more ingrained standards that we may not

an ethics of generosity in the finite image of the ultimate generosity. (486)

This process of learning, by way of a mind that develops feelings, attitudes, cognition, perception, and purposefulness relies on personal and collective efforts to translate the Revelation language into advances in skills, qualities of mind, and action. The participation of a few million people around the world has contributed to an evolving framework for action that relies on cycles of study, action, reflection, and deliberation and conversation among groups of friends who begin to see themselves, their local communities and neighborhoods, as well as their local and regional Bahá'í institutions

initially think to question when perceiving, judging and acting. These are uncovered and explored by way of the kinds of intense discussion and conversations that occur in the study circles.

In describing this process, Paul Lample draws attention to an image, developed by Otto Neurath, that McDowell also uses to explain human learning. We are, as it were, at sea on a ship that we have to rebuild, one piece at a time, while still staying afloat. We replace by bits and pieces one timber of the ship—one concept, or group of concepts—after another, making gradual adjustments as we come to learn new ways of thinking about the world (174). "[T]hinking," as McDowell puts it, "is under a standing obligation to reflect about and criticize the standards

by which at any time, it takes itself to be governed" (Mind and World 81).

This work of rebuilding our "ship of concepts" is facilitated by the religious language at the center of the learning process being described here. By surfacing the spiritual nature of the world we have in view, and of the relation-

as our inherited conceptual frameworks come under scrutiny in the light cast by the language of Revelation, we learn to see with our "own eyes and not through the eyes of others," calibrating our capacity to exercise judgment, in recognition that "justice is [God's] gift to thee and the sign of [His] lov-

ships between the realities within it, thine
this language helps the mind advance Hidden
in its understanding of the meaning
of things, and thereby build sound
concepts, new ways of perceiving the
world (including other human beings).
It develops our capacity to reason all
through the feelings, attitudes, beliefs, perception,
norms, values, and purposes that jus-
tify our actions. Our interactions with
others can take on a sense and a feeling every-
that is spiritual, not because we turn us
away from the material dimension, Ruhi
but because we come to see greater
coherence between the material and
the spiritual dimensions of reality. We
develop finer discriminations in how involvement
we see and hear the world in both its to
material and spiritual aspects, relying elaborat-
on our rational faculties and capacities learn to
for knowledge as well as our capacities observa-
for feeling and purposefulness.

Genuine religious language is about enti-
unity, love and understanding, moral participants in
qualities, and the living of a life that the
moves a person closer to God. It is a reality,
language that deals with features of the per-
world that can guide our perceptual realm

ing-kindness. Set it then before eyes" (Bahá'u'lláh, Arabic Words no. 4).30

'Abdu'l-Bahá writes,

> let them open wide their eyes and uncover the inner realities of things,… Our spiritual our inward sight must be opened, so that we can see the signs and traces of God's spirit in thing. Everything can reflect to the light of the Spirit. (qtd. in Institute 9)

From what has been described, it should be clear that in our in this learning process, we need adopt the scientific approach ed on earlier. Where scientists look beyond the mere surface tions of the object world in order termine the underlying forces and ties operating in nature, this process learn to look beyond surface of culture and external and the limitations of that way of ception, opening their minds to a

attention, allowing us to see the world in the light of those spiritual qualities of love, mutual understanding, care, kindness, and justice. Throughout our involvement in this learning process,

30 For a discussion of the nature of this judgment, see John S. Hatcher's article in this issue, "The Mizán of Affect in Material versus Metaphysical Models of Human Consciousness."

of spirituality beyond nature. "It is common nowadays to think of science and religion as opposed. To the contrary, faith and reason are twins born of sameness and difference," write David and Ricardo Nirenberg (97). Science, in its determinate ways of knowing, represents an unquestionable advance for humanity, but religion in the form of the divine language of Revelation provides another avenue of knowledge and experience that complements, overlaps and extends the ways that science engages the world. Our understanding, whether in science, the arts, religion, or in the practical course of ordinary life, is always a capacity of human agency (or, we might say, the human soul)—an expression of a mind that finds itself in both an object world of spatially extended entities, energies and forc-

true. I will conclude this paper, then, by considering whether a view of the mind that emerges from the Bahá'í writings is, if not demonstrably true in a scientific sense, capable of grounding the philosophical view of the mind presented thus far.

P S :
T M S

A further question, then: Is it not time to recover a view that brings together an understanding of our range of mindful capacities for thought, feeling, expressiveness and purposefulness with a ready acceptance, too, of the limitations of mind before the infinite reality beyond the horizon of our finite and determinate knowledge?

The mind and, therefore, human

ac-
es, but also in a space of non-physical tion have a degree of freedom that lies
abstraction and ideals. The advance- outside the laws of causality that the
ment of human civilization depends natural and physical sciences generally
on a deepening of our understanding, take as given. While many contempo-
based on all capacities of mind: the rary philosophers persuasively argue
instrumental and designative, but also that natural science is not enough to
the expressive, the cooperative, and the fully understand the human mind, the
communicative, along with the mind's Bahá'í idea of mind goes a step further
sense of value and purpose. in holding that the mind has a relation-
I have suggested here that interac- ship to the soul.
tion with the language of Revelation, The mind may be dependent on
particularly in a process of social the health of the brain and body, but
learning with others, draws on and it is not entirely of that world, for it
strengthens the capacities of the human reaches into a higher level of reality,
mind in a way that can help us address however uncanny or other-worldly
our collective problems, and advance this may sound to philosophers. If we
civilization. We may agree with this understand the supernatural correct-
proposition, of course, without also ly as a quality of spirituality and the
believing that Revelation, or the spe- true nature of the human spirit, we can
cific claims it makes about reality, are attain to an understanding that both

recognizes the constraints imposed by changes in the brain are often generated
nature, and the resulting importance of through deliberate practices—habits of
science and material means, and yet will that lead to actions. Arendt similar-
transcends those constraints in certain ly argues effectively that will

is real, and
ways that rely on our learning from the
language of divine Revelation.
Neuroscience and studies of animal
cognition are, thus, certainly necessary
and essential to human advancement.
A scientific understanding of the brain
serves to inform a better understanding
of the mind.31 Physical happenings af-
fect the brain, causing changes in our
minds. Lack of sleep, poor nutrition,
and physical injuries provide all the ev-
idence we need in this respect. It is also
true that our conscious and unconscious
choices—about what to think, how to
judge, and what simple or complex ac-
tions we undertake (from drinking cof-
fee to learning to ski downhill)—also
cause changes in the physical state of
the brain.32 There are influences going
both ways—brain to mind and mind to
brain—but not all correlations amount
to causal explanations. Davidson ar-
gues—effectively, in my view—that
there are no psycho-physical laws:
though some brain occurrences that then

is different from mere thinking. Human beings do manage to develop character and right conduct, and we all are wit-ness to how these can often manifest themselves against terrible odds in the exigencies of human life.

We also recognize limitations that we cannot overcome in principle. Bahá'u'lláh comments on the limita-tions of any total understanding of the mind given its relationship with the soul, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes that "the uttermost limit of [the power of comprehension's] flight is to compre-hend [only] the realities, properties of contingent things" (Some Answered Questions 58:3).

Writing to Dr. Auguste Forel, an ear-ly co-founder of the first neuron theory of the brain, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "for the mind to manifest itself, the hu-man body must be whole; and a sound mind cannot be but in a sound body."

But He also made it clear that the mind, while "circumscribed", is

also beyond
lead to mindful actions, and some mind- the brain and body by the power of the
ful actions (the decision to drink coffee, soul:
for instance) impact the brain, there
always remains a measure of free will. It is through the power of the soul
The brain is plastic and adaptable, and that the mind comprehendeth, imagineth and exerteth its influ-
31 Indeed, Shoghi Effendi writes ence, whilst the soul is a power
that one of the important future pursuits of that is free. . . . The mind is cir-
humanity will be “the sharpening and re- cumscribed, the soul limitless.
finement of the human brain” (204). . . . all other beings, whether of
32 See Sanjay Gupta’s excellent the mineral, the vegetable or the
summary of keeping the brain healthy in animal world, cannot deviate from
the aptly titled Keep Sharp.

the laws of nature, nay, all are Our human agency operates in a
the slaves thereof. Man, howev- self-conscious way at a level above and
er, though in body the captive of beyond what natural or physical sci-
nature is yet free in his mind and ence can account for by mere descrip-
soul, and hath the mastery over tion and explanation of causal mech-
nature. anism. In considering how the mind develops a view of the world by way
‘Abdu’l-Bahá thus asserts that there of its relationships with other minds
is physical causality, or determinism, through language and concepts, Pippin
in the material realm, yet freedom, summarizes well the views of many
spontaneity and autonomy for the other philosophers when he states that,
mind, however circumscribed or lim- “there is something about some human
ited. This opposition between freedom capacities that . . . will never be expli-
and determinism has long been a co- cable scientifically, no matter our even-
nundrum in philosophy—how can they tual knowledge of ‘feedback loops’ and
exist in the same world? brain reorganization”

(Interanimations 65).

Yet nowhere do we find ‘Abdu’l-Bahá bothered by this problem. He views our minds as straddling the physical and spiritual dimensions of a more extended reality encompassing both. In contemporary philosophy, too, there is greater acceptance of the compatibility of necessity and determinism in nature and the freedom of human mind and in-human action. This acceptance may stem in part from the realization of the impossibility, in principle, of ever arriving at an explanation of the totality of the physical and natural universe.[33] Nagel’s idea of an “extended reality,” some of which may be open to scientific discovery, but some remaining forever beyond science, or McGinn’s “mysterium” in physical reality, forever beyond science, are useful ways of considering the impossibility of ever knowing everything about physical or natural reality.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes a similar point, yet draws a bolder conclusion:

> Man possesses conscious intelligence and reflection; nature does not. This is an established fundamental among philosophers . . . The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature’s ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life . . . Notwithstanding the gift of this supernatural power, it is most amazing that materialists still consider themselves within the bonds and captivity of nature.
>
> (Promulgation 20:5)

An “intelligence” and “ideal faculties . . . beyond nature’s ken” puts the mind, including its “capacity for scientific acquisition,” beyond an explanation by natural science. Many contemporary philosophers would agree with this assessment; but ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reference to the “supernatural” is a term philosophers resist. McDowell mentions the “supernatural” as an option that also involves the spiritual. The material and spiritual are understood as dimensions of one single reality. This model is not any more “other-worldly” than any other that recognizes the immateriality of our

33 See footnote no. 23.

consciousness,
for understanding the mind, but quick-
ly dismisses it. He writes that we need
not be bothered by “the fear of super-
naturalism,” and argues for an explana-
tion of the human mind’s uniqueness,
however inexplicable by natural sci-
ence, as a “second nature” (Mind and
World 84).34 Nagel considers “divine
intervention” as one way to explain the
evolution of the human mind but also
sets it aside, opting instead for an un-
derstanding of mind that will have to
wait for a currently unavailable, but he
hopes eventual, scientific understand-
ing of teleology that might explain the
evolution of consciousness and mind
(Mind and Cosmos 66–67). McDowell
and Nagel both dismiss the “supernat-
ural” and “divine intervention” based
on a conventional understanding of the
“supernatural.” Yet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá un-
derstands the “supernatural” as simply
that which is beyond nature. Thus, a
mind can be embedded in nature and

thought, feeling and
is a way of understanding
human life that are abstract
al, simultaneously beyond the
natural
world and yet immediately at
hand in
the commonplace experience of our
mindedness or consciousness.

As Gabriel writes, “[a]s
beings . . . we humans are in
contact
with infinitely many immaterial
ities” (Meaning 9). These
realities of
mind can be called
“spiritual” if “su-
pernatural” is too far a reach,
though
“spiritual” may also raise
objections in
a culture that arguably lacks a
strong
sense of the sacred or the holy,
and

where material aspects of life
eclipse
the spiritual. Yet such
realities of mind
are “outside of
nature,” beyond the
biological and natural, and
though
they may be immaterial
in mind, once
translated into human action
they have
effects on the world that always
carry
both material and human, or
“spiritu-

the physical but also in a larger reality al," consequences.

To support the contention that the

34 McDowell relies on Wittgen- mind is in essence a spiritual or super-

stein's statement that, "Commanding, natural phenomenon, we can consider

questioning, recounting, chatting, are as the insufficiency of considering the

much part of our natural history as walk- mind, or the human being, as a purely

ing, eating, drinking" in order to justify natural entity. As Pippin argues, human

his use of the term "second nature" but his beings have "no naturally determined

point, like Pippin's, is that "commanding, niche in the world" (Interanimations

questioning, recounting" are beyond the 24). We find our place in the harmo-

natural world by the uniqueness of our hu- nization of our interaction with the

man mind.

physical world in which we are embod- 55:6). "The mind itself, reason itself,

ied, and of our purposes and intentions, is an ideal reality and not tangible"

meanings, norms and language that are (Promulgation 111:13). It is the human

thoroughly conceptual, abstract, and mind that generates "the sciences, arts,

immaterial in both our individual and inventions, crafts and discoveries"

collective consciousness. The human (Some Answered Questions 48:4), "for

creature is never a "natural man," as it is only physically that man resem-

Hobbes and Rousseau both imagined bles the lower creation, with regard

for their differing arguments about hu- to his intellect he is totally unlike it"

man nature. The human cannot be nat- (Paris Talks 23:3).

ural, because, as argued at the outset of The soul is spiritual and outside of

the paper, she does not live primarily nature, and so too is the human mind

in an environment, but in a world. The in its inseparable relationship

to the
human being is able to conceive and
inhabit alternative worlds and orders of
reality, from the political to the moral
and from the aesthetic to the spiritual,
escaping the here and now of a natural
life, living in worlds either shaped by
inspiration or demeaned by a degraded
imagination. What might be, what can
be, and what is valuable and desirable
in human life, always lies beyond our
biological and bodily needs—yet such
a human life must also serve those
needs and be in harmony with the natural environment if we are to survive as
a human race.

"Before all else, God created the
mind." 'Abdu'l-Bahá cites this Holy
Tradition on the first page of The Secret
of Divine Civilization, and explains
that "[t]his supreme emblem of God
stands first in the order of creation and
first in rank." He refers to "the intellect and wisdom" as "luminous lights",
and states that "grace and splendour"
derive "from wisdom and the power of
thought." The mind is "the power of

soul. Unless we realize who we
are as
human creatures, different in
kind and
quality from animals, and from
nature
and the physical world, we will
struggle to understand and embrace
the responsibility that devolves upon
us, as
spiritual creatures, to look
after the natural world as we should,
preserving its
integrity and health, while
advancing
our own health, spiritually and
materially, personally and
collectively.

Walk thou high above the world
of being . . . Those who have re-
jected God and firmly cling to
Nature as it is in itself are,
verily,
bereft of knowledge and
wisdom.
(Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets,
Lawh-i-
Hikmat ¶¶17–21)

In this rapid overview of the
mind
and the "power of the
human spirit,"
much has been left
unexplored. Of
late, there has been an
outpouring of
thoughtful publications about
consciousness, mindedness,

sentience
the human spirit . . . the light that shines and sapience, wisdom and meaning,
from it" (Some Answered Questions knowledge and sound reasoning. This
Mind, "the Power of the Human Spirit" 51

paper represents a modest effort at engaging in the philosophical discourse in this
field. Philosophy itself remains a discipline within which many thinkers, though
by no means all, maintain a level of respect for religion in spite of the advance of
secularism. With that in mind, I hope that this paper may inspire Bahá'ís and like-
minded individuals to read philosophy, including the works of philosophers who
do not share their own views, trusting that continued earnest efforts from seekers of
truth will advance our collective understanding of the relationship between human
agency and the mind, casting light on the mind's relationship to the "human spirit"
and "the rational soul."

W C

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