Call into Being, The: Introduction to a Bahá'í Existentiali

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"Whatever duty Thou hast prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves." (Gleanings, I, 4-5)

1) Introduction

Having demonstrated the Aristotelian substratum or soil of the Bahá'í Writings in "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings", it remains to be shown how an existential tree grow from this ground. However, before pursuing that issue, let us clarify for ourselves why such an undertaking is important and worthwhile. What, we might fairly ask, is an existential approach to the conceptual substratum of the Writings, and what unique contribution can it make to our understanding of them?

To see how a Bahá'í existentialism can grow from the Aristotelian substratum, we must ask how we would actually experience the ideas we gain by abstract analysis. How would they affect our understanding of ourselves, and with that, our self-image? At this point it becomes evident that anything that affects our self-image inevitably touches our emotions, our will, our intellect and, perhaps, above all, our individual and collective actions. It affects the whole person. Put in other terms, we might say that the existentialist approach focuses on the individual and collective human self-image found in the Bahá'í Writings and on how we might respond to this self-image. It examines how, in the light of the Writings, we understand ourselves as individuals who are members of a species and how we respond to this understanding in affect, in intellect, in volition and in action. In other words, an existential approach to the Writings, and, in this case to their Aristotelian substratum, provides a bridge between an abstract understanding and the actual exigencies of daily life: it serves the purpose of helping us live the Writings more consciously than we otherwise could and does so by exploring the concrete, 'real-life' implications of these concepts. Such an analysis can do no more than provoke further thought and self-exploration in others since no existential analysis can ever be exhaustive.

This emphasis on real experience is the historical spring of the entire existential movement which begins with a demand for philosophy to break out of its confinement to Descartes' isolated, thinking subject and include the whole subject actually living in the world. All varieties of existentialism reject Descartes' subject-object analysis of our relationship to the world because it is only an abstraction from our actual "being-in-the-world" (Being and Time, 78; see also BT, 246-250) and does not, therefore, accurately present our real situation. This distorts our understanding of humankind. "In abstracting myself from given circumstances, from the empirical self, from the

situation in which I find myself, I run the risk of escaping into a real never-never or no-man's-land - into what strictly must be called a nowhere . . . " (The Mystery of Being, Vol. 1, 164). As Sartre puts it: " Our being is immediately 'in situation'; that is, it arises in enterprises and knows itself first in so far as it is reflected in those enterprises. We discover ourselves then in a world people with demands, in the heart of projects. . . " (BN, 47). For philosophy, the result is disastrous: " from the moment we seek to transcend abstract thought's proper limits and to arrive at global abstraction [e.g., idealist philosophy], we topple over into the gulf of non-sense - of non-sense in the strict philosophical sense, that is, of words without reasonable meaning" (MB, Vol. 1, 164.). In other words, Descartes' radical subject-object division is wholly artificial and leads to such pseudo-problems as trying to prove the existence of the external world, a "scandal" (Kant) which has dogged western philosophy since his time. The Bahá'í
Writings do not waste time with such non-issues. This is even evident in their form which shows them to be directly related to real people in real situations: Bahá'u'lláh's and Abdu'l-Bahá's tablets and epistles to particular individuals,
verbal answers to specific questions posed by believers, letters of guidance to personal problems and the like. This is the kind of writing that demonstrates a firm understanding that we are always "being-in-the-world" (BT, 78) and never an isolated subject who cannot be logically sure that the external world exists.

At this point, a question obtrudes itself: why explore the existential
dimension of the Bahá'í Writings after a study of their highly abstract Aristotelian substratum? Why all the previous rigmarole about Aristotle instead of a direct plunge into the Writings? After all, in life, do we not abstract after we have had the real experience? Why reverse the order and begin with the abstractions found in the Writings? There are two answers to this question. First: if we want to deepen our understanding of the Writings, we must first make clear to ourselves and understand the philosophical concepts embedded in them. This requires us to abstract and study these concepts. Simply plunging into the Writings may be satisfactory and sufficient for some, but it cannot provide the specific and precise knowledge and understandings that others may desire and need and which may be necessary to reveal new depths in the Writings. There is no reason to believe that an existential exploration of the Writings is somehow exempt from the necessity for such a clear conceptual understanding.

Second: in exploring the existential dimension of the Writings, there is a special reason to begin with the conceptual content or substratum, namely the historical fact that existential thinking has a certain prone-ness to slip into pure and arbitrary subjectivism (Existentialism, 46). This is already noticeable in Kierkegaard, the father of modern existentialism, who asserts in his Concluding Unscientific Postscript that "truth is subjectivity"

(p.169). This tendency to excessive arbitrary subjectivity - currently so evident in some of existentialism's philosophical descendents such as Derrida - has allowed many of its valuable philosophical insights to be ignored. Thus, by sticking close to the conceptual framework of the Writings, we shall be less likely to slip into the subjectivist extremes by putting rational limits on any efforts to indulge in excessively arbitrary and outlandishly subjective readings that do violence to the essential nature of the text. Of course, this is not to deny that the Writings can be read in various ways but it must be remembered that the permissibility of many readings does not assure the permissibility of any and all readings. Abdu'l-Bahá makes this clear when, for example, he explicitly rejects any pantheistic (SAQ, 290-296) and re-incarnationist (SAQ, 282-289) interpretations of the Sacred Texts.

2) The Nature of Existentialism

At this point is necessary to provide a brief description of what existentialism is and is not. In a nutshell, existentialism is an analysis of the human situation from the point of view and experience of the human subject who lives and acts in the world. In the language of Husserl, who exerted a profound influence on existentialist thinkers, consciousness is intentional; it is always about something. Consequently, the existential subject is an agent, and is certainly not the thinking Cartesian subject who is so intellectually isolated from the world that s/he cannot even be certain that an external world exists! We might also say that the existential self is participational - it actively participates in the world and thus prevents clear-cut and absolute distinctions between subjects and objects. From the existentialist viewpoint, Descartes' pure and simple subject-object distinction is merely an abstraction from our original human situation and, while highly useful in the physical sciences which deal with relatively simple objects, is considerably less useful in dealing with more complex entities such as living creatures, human beings, groups, and communities. The social sciences, for example, not only gather much of their data in discussions, surveys or other 'participations' with subjects but also require a great deal of personal interpretation of even impersonal data such as crime statistics. Descartes' highly idealized subject-object distinction rapidly breaks down at this point because knowledge itself has become 'participational': our participation or inter-action with the knowledge affects both the gathering of knowledge as well as our understanding of it. In this situation, simple subject-object distinctions are no longer useful in studying phenomena because they no longer reflect the actual conditions in which the research is being done. Marcel speaks for all existentialists when he writes that existentialism asserts "the primacy of the existential over the ideal, with the added proviso that the existential must inevitably be related to incarnate being, i.e. to the fact of being in the world" (Creative Fidelity, 21)

Existentialists also tend to agree with Sartre that existence precedes essence

- although there can be much variation in how we are to understand this. If we understand it to say that by means of decisions in the actual process of existence we create our own personalities, or selves or identities, then there is agreement among existentialist all thinkers. However, this agreement would vanish if we asserted that there is no such thing as a general human nature, or, that there is no common structure in what Heidegger calls Dasein, that is, human be-ing. Being and Time, probaly the central work of modern existentialism, dedicates itself to nothing less than outlining the structure inherent in and, in that sense, essential to, all Dasein. Vital as it is, this difference must not be allowed to obscure the fact that existentialist tend to concentrate and agree on a number of issues: the essential role of freedom, choice, risk and action; the importance of authentic existence and living in good faith; the role of anxiety in illuminating the human situation; concern and engagement with others and the world; the confrontation with human finitude and death; the subject of God; the inherent limitations of abstract, rational analysis, and the role of paradox in human existence. This mix of themes is present whether the existentialist is an atheist such as Sartre or Camus, a theist such as Kierkegaard and Marcel, or a non-theist such as the Heidegger of Being and Time.

One of the most important things to understand is that existentialism is not simply free-style opinionating (no matter how passionate) but rather a philosophy that grows out of a careful analysis of the human situation. In other words, regardless of their individual stances on particular issues, all existential philosophies have a definable vision of how humans are situated vis a vis the nature of reality, the social world we have constructed, our nature as human beings ("Dasein" as Heidegger calls us, "pour-soi" according to Sartre), the constraints under which we live and the challenges and opportunities we face. To put the matter succinctly: human existence has a particular structure that distinguishes it from the existence of things and animals. Different forms of existentialism explore different aspects of this structure, or explore it from various points of view, but all maintain that human existence has its own essential characteristics. However, the resulting differences notwithstanding, there is a family resemblance among their analyses, conclusions and concerns (See Macquarrie's Existentialism and Collins' The Existentialists for example).

3) The Unique Status of Human Existence

One of the principles that a Bahá'í existentialism shares with other existentialisms is the notion that human existence is fundamentally different from other forms of being. Whereas all other beings are 'in-themselves', "en-soi" (BN, Ixxiv; 95) and simply exist as they are without being consciously present to themselves or feeling any inner conflicts about themselves, humans alone are 'for-themselves', "pour-soi" (BN, 89), that is, consciously present to themselves and required to take a stance in regards to themselves. They can choose - or refuse - to live for themselves. Thus, human be-ing is fundamentally distinct from other kinds of be-ing. Heidegger

reserves the term "Dasein" for human be-ing to indicate that Dasein is distinguished from other kinds of be-ings by that fact that we only ex-ist, that is, consciously stand out from our environment and thus have certain unique capabilities as well as liabilities. It is always concerned with "its ownmost possibilities of Being in the world" (BT, 137); elsewhere he says, "Dasein exists as an entity for which, in its being, that being is itself an issue".(BT, 458). Similarly, Gabriel Marcel asserts that the human " 'I' cannot in any case whatsoever be treated as a 'that' because the 'I' is the very negation of the 'that', of any 'that' whatsoever . . . " (MB, Vol. 1, 110). The human " 'I' " (ibid.) cannot simply be assimilated into the world of things. The Bahá'í Writings are in fundamental agreement with this analysis
of the human situation. Humankind is not simply a part of nature, but is defined by its potential for rationality or "rational soul" (SAQ, 151; 208) which not only distinguishes us from inanimate nature, plants and animals (SAQ, 208) but also has power over nature (PUP, 30) but as well as "no end" (SAQ, 153). Furthermore, the exhortations to evolve, improve and free ourselves (Gleanings, CLI, 319; TB, 95) indicate that the Bahá'í Writings, like the existentialist philosophers view humans as being
present to themselves and being objects of action "for-themselves" (BN, 89) and deeply concerned with their "ownmost possibilities" (BT, 137). In other words, they all agree that humankind is self-conscious in a way unlike any other beings. For this reasons, unlike other creatures, we are able to make ourselves into projects.

4) The Meaning of "To Exist"

The Bahá'í Writings and existential philosophy also share similar viewpoints of
what it means to "exist". The Writings refer to the 'call into being' (TB, 116; Prayers and Meditations, 49; Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, 4) with its unmistakable suggestion that coming into existence means to stand out from a background, "to emerge, to arise" (MB, Vol. 2, 35). Elsewhere he writes that to exist means not just to be "present to my own awareness" (MB, Vol. 1,111) but also to be a "manifest being" (ibid.): "I exist - that is as much to say: I have something to make myself known and recognized both by others and by myself . . . "(ibid., 112). This is exactly what the etymology of the word draws to our attention: ex - sistere. When things come into existence, they appear, they show or reveal or manifest themselves and are thus differentiated from their background of environment (See BT, 53-4) and, consequently, no longer hidden. This 'standing out' is doubly true of humankind because we not only arise from or are called from the cosmic background into appearance, but, as shown previously, we also exist in another sense, insofar as we are "for-ourselves", are consciously concerned for our "ownmost possibilities" (BT, 137) and can shape ourselves. We stand out from other beings because we have freedom and choice. In this second sense,

humankind alone exists, although all other entities certainly have being: they are, but not as conscious projects for themselves. From this point of view, existentialism is a philosophy which seeks to reveal and clarify those aspects that make human existence unique. This, of course, accords with the fact that the very notion of a divine revelation to humankind presupposes that we are different from other beings and have different "exigencies and requirements" (Gleanings, CVI, 213).

5) The Concept of Potentials

This paper will illustrate more specifically how a Bahá'í existentialism can be grown from its Aristotelian conceptual substratum, by concentrating on an examination of the concept of potentials, bearing in mind, of course, that a mere paper can provide no more than an outline sketch of what needs to be said in a full treatment. As already shown in the first part of this work, both the Writings and Aristotle agree that human beings, like all other entities, are essentially defined by their potentials (PUP,38; BWF, 262), "possibilities" (PUP, 113), "capacities" (ibid., 23; BWF, 249), "susceptibilities" (PUP,23.) or "powers" (ibid.,17; 49). Bahá'u'lláh tells us, "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value" (Gleanings, CXXII, 260). Thus, humankind differs from animals in regards to the capacity for rational and abstract thought, (SAQ, 187; BWF, 305) while human beings differ from one another in terms of innate intellectual capacity (SWAB, 131). Moreover, unlike animals, for us our "ownmost-potentiality-for-Being is an issue (BT, 225); humans are the be-ings who wonder about themselves The Writings also tell us that human potentials are inexhaustible since all of God's attributes are reflected in us (BWF, 311; SAQ, 236). These facts raise several questions. How are we to understand ourselves in light of them? What do they tell us about the nature and structure of human existence and how we experience it?' What does it mean to understand ourselves "in terms of [our] possibilities"? (BT, 331; also 185).

6) Being "In Process" and "Being Toward"

If our species and individual essences (henceforth 'haecceitas') is defined by our potentials then it follows that both as species and as individuals we are always, in process and, therefore, incomplete. Marcel, for example, says that the self is not a self-sufficient monad, but rather is, and is part of and "uncompleted structure extending beyond the self" (MB, Vol. 1, 82). We are always, as Heidegger says, "Being toward a possibility" (BT, 305). On the individual level this is emphasized by the Bahá'í teaching on immortality according to which we develop our potentials without end through the "many worlds" (The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys, 32) of God (SAQ, 237). At the collective level, this is emphasized by the

Bahá'í view of human evolution as the gradual actualization and manifestation of previously hidden potentials rather than the transformation of one species into another (SAQ, 198). It is, however, important to note that these possibilities provide for a moderate freedom: while they allow, indeed, demand, growth into particular directions they forbid it in others. We must not make the mistake of thinking that 'being-toward-possibility' allows anything and anything to be actualized since this would be license and not rational or "true liberty" (Gleanings, XLIII, 92). We must always remember that the possibilities that define our humanity and our haecceitas are created by God and are thus equivalent to divine commandments we are obligated to follow (Gleanings, CLIX, 335-336). Heidegger says that "The meaning of Dasein's [human] Being is not something free-floating . . . but is the self-understanding of Dasein itself" (BT, 372). In short, we are to understand - and actualize - ourselves according to how were to created and not according to our "vain imaginings" (TB, 41)

7) Being "Not-Yet"

Because we are 'being-toward-possibility', human beings (Heidegger's "Dasein") are inevitably "not yet" (BT, 286), that is, we are never completely ourselves because we are works in progress rather than finished products. It also means that "Dasein [a human being] is constantly 'more' than it factically is" (BT, 185) because of the unactualized potentials that make up our essence. Both as a species and as individuals, we are "permeated with possibility" (BT, 186) that must always be taken into account if we are to understand ourselves correctly and develop an accurate, authentic self-image. These possibilities represent our more complete, future selves and their mere presence - even as mere potentials - cannot help but influence us in the present time: we can either accept them, reject them or ignore them but in each case a decision of some kind is required. The influence of these potentials in opening us up to further, more complete and development may be understood as one way in which we experience the 'call into being' because we are being called to actualize more complete versions of ourselves that are not yet in existence.

This means that to some extent, we are always in the position of waiting for ourselves and living in anticipation (BT, 373; see also BN, 43) of a final identity. In the words of Heidegger, "Anticipation makes Dasein [human beings] authentically futural and in such a way that Dasein, as being, is always coming towards itself. . . " (ibid.). Elsewhere he says we are a "Being towards one's ownmost, distinctive potentiality-for-being" (BT, 372; italics added). We are always approaching, but never fully reaching, ourselves. As Sartre puts it, "man is always separated from what he is by all the breadth of the being which he is not . . . Man is a being of distances" (BN, 21). Final identity recedes like the horizon while forever drawing us onward. For some, such an unrealizable project is an unpalatable vision that promises endless

frustration; Sartre, for example referred to humankind as a "useless passion" (Sartre, quoted in The Existentialists, 78). While that response is certainly an option we can choose, it is not necessarily imposed on us. In the Bahá'í vision of life and the after-life, the endless quest for ever more adequate self-actualization is a positive vision reflecting the infinite glory God has bestowed on humankind. We are all engaged on an endless voyage of discovery in which every moment is both a sheltering harbor and a point of departure. A Bahá'í existentialism would certainly have a more positive tone and mood than the traditional forms of existentialism. Given the importance of mood in existentialism, a positive mood would certainly be a radical departure in the development of this philosophy.

The fact that we are a "being-toward" (BT, 197), that, whether we are conscious of it or not, our lives are innately vectored, have a direction and live towards a particular future, namely, the actualization of our personal potentials. Our lives are not simply intended to be a random and shapeless succession of events no matter how pleasurable this might be because each of human life is innately and inherently structured as a particular "for-the-sake-of-which" (BT,119). They exist for something. In other words, having a purpose is an inherent part of our being, and if we do not consciously choose to have a purpose, some purpose, one of our own potentials will, for better or worse, choose us. Then we do not live actively but are lived by a part of ourselves that may not always be our most worthy part. This passivity is one of the ways in which our lives can become inauthentic, that is, we can lose our best potential while yet seeming to live normal lives.

8) Self-Transcendence

Another way of portraying the fact that we are a "being-toward" (BT, 197) and a "not-yet" (BT, 286) is to say that humankind is self-transcendent: we are always trying to overcome ourselves as we are in favour of what we might be (MB, Vol. 2, 101-2). Indeed, Marcel links this "urgent inner need for transcendence" (MB, Vol. 1, 68) to "an aspiration towards purer and purer modes of experience" (ibid.). For his part, Sartre links our urge for self-transcendence to the inherently doomed project of becoming God. In short, almost all existentialist agree that if we live authentically, that is, according to our human nature, we are inherently and structurally unsatisfied with ourselves and seek to be better than we are which suggests that we are inevitably plagued by varying degrees of self-dissatisfaction. (This is not to say that existentialism or the Bahá'í Writings endorse a self-crippling or self-destructive perfectionism that is a pathological perversion of our innate dissatisfaction with ourselves.) This self-transcendent function draws attention to the heroic potential within ourselves. In other words, we can actively embrace our urge to self-transcendence instead of merely enduring it passively, and thus make it a conscious heroic self-conquest, self-overcoming; we have the option of choosing self-overcoming as a way of life. Such a struggle is certainly inherent in

living as a Bahá'í. We must continuously purify ourselves, that is, live more and more according to our natures as self-transcendent beings seeking higher levels of spiritual attainment. We might call this an 'evolutionary heroism' that seeks self-conquest as its major goal. To use Abdu'l-Bahá's enlightening metaphor, this is the heroism of the lump of coal that struggles to become a diamond (SAQ, 234), a heroism that requires us to "cleanse [the] heart from the world and all its vanities" (Gleanings, CXIV, 237). The point of this heroism is to transcend the current limits of the human condition, "to draw nigh unto such stations as none can comprehend save those whom God hath willed" (Kitab-i-Aqdas, 56).

9) Self-Dissatisfaction

As already noted, it cannot be denied that given our nature as "not-yet" (BT, 286), we are bound to suffer a certain amount of eternal dissatisfaction with or alienation from ourselves because it is impossible for us to be 'all there'. In Marcel's words, "the need for transcendence presents itself, above all, [as a] deeply experienced . . . kind of dissatisfaction" (MB, Vol. 1, 52).

Humans by their nature are bound to be restless and unsettled. While Heidegger's Christian background leads him to interpret this dissatisfaction as guilt, and to claim that "being-guilty belongs to Dasein's [human] being", BT, 353) Bahá'ís can adopt a very different interpretation, one that is, in fact, more logically in keeping with the belief that humans are always becoming and "not-yet" (BT, 286). The understanding that we are "not-yet" (ibid.) does not logically necessitate despair or feelings of guilt. Indeed, Bahá'ís can not merely accept but even embrace this innate dissatisfaction as 'divine', as one of God's signs that we reflect the infinity of His names (BWF, 311), that we always face an open future, that we are always free to remake and renew ourselves, that we face an infinite number of new possibilities for actualization and, therefore, ought never to despair. Literally, at every moment we can appropriate to ourselves personally Bahá'u'lláh's words, "In every age and cycle He hath, through the splendorous light shed by the Manifestations of His wondrous Essence, recreated all things, so that whatsoever reflecteth in the heavens and on the earth the signs of His glory may not be deprived of the outpourings of His mercy, nor despair of the showers of His favors" (Gleanings, XXVI, 62).

10) Detachment

Out of all this grows an ethic of detachment, starting at the most personal level. Given our situation as perpetually incomplete, we should not be too 'stuck' on any current version of ourselves, but should, rather, practice the art of detachment from our present personalities since they are all 'just temporary'. "Cast away that which ye possess, and, on the wings of detachment, soar beyond all created things." (Gleanings, LXXII, 139). From this it follows that feeling fully at one with themselves is not an authentic option for Bahá'ís since any such feeling must, at best, be a temporary respite; if

such feelings persist, they will inevitably blind the possessors to their real ontological circumstances as a perpetually unfinished work needing improvement. Feelings of profound self-satisfaction with one's current condition and a desire to prolong it are to be understood as signs of an inauthentic existence at variance with our true ontological natures. Such a seriously flawed self-image or self-understanding cannot help but lead to an inauthentic existence with negative intellectual, emotional, spiritual and behavioral consequences.

11) Dialectical Self-Conflict

We must remember that our current condition and identity are being constantly undermined by the potentials of our future; in other words, our future selves waiting for actualization are involved in an inherent and on-going dialectical struggle with our present selves as we continuously re-create ourselves in new and more adequate forms. It is our nature to be locked in this dialectical self-conflict, and were it to stop, we would immediately fall into inauthentic existence. Therefore, this condition is not to be regarded negatively, but rather as part of our ontological identity as human beings. There is no doubt that this internal self-conflict causes suffering, but we must learn to understand this suffering as 'growing pains', as positive signs of our advancement. Once again, we must appropriate to ourselves personally what Bahá'u'lláh says about the conflicts in the world: "The fears and agitation which the revelation of this law provokes in men's hearts should indeed be likened to the cries of the suckling babe weaned from his mother's milk, if ye be of them that perceive. Were men to discover the motivating purpose of God's Revelation, they would assuredly cast away their fears, and, with hearts filled with gratitude, rejoice with exceeding gladness" (Gleanings, LXXXVIII, 175). There is no denial to the pains and agitations here - for that too would be inauthentic - but rather they are re-interpreted by a higher level of understanding. A Bahá'í existentialism does not dishonestly deny the painful and negative aspects inherent to human existence - for all existences other than God's are bound to suffer as a result of their ontological limitations - ; instead, it re-interprets these negative aspects from the point of view of our dynamic evolutionary development.

12) Progressive Revelation

At this point it becomes evident that the innate ontological structure and dynamic of our personal lives reflects the Bahá'í Teaching of "progressive revelation" (Kitab-i-Aqdas, #126, p.280) in which certain essential religious truths are recapitulated in new forms, and new divine potentials released from them to match the intellectual, material and spiritual conditions of new times. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. To live authentically in accordance with our essential natures - or in Sartre's terms, the innate structure of the "pour-soi" - both the human species and individuals are required to grow, to overcome their own collective and personal "ancestral forms" (PUP, 127) and advance into higher, that is, more subtle, more inclusive and more adequate versions of ourselves. They must do so despite the

fact that the process inevitably involves overcoming pain, cherished preconceptions and deeply rooted preferences. However, the alternative is to suffer even more difficulties as a result of adopting an inauthentic existence that violates our inherent ontological natures. Continuing to walk in shoes that are self-flattering and attractive but too small is simply not a viable solution to foot-growth.

The fact that we are continuously actualizing our potentials also means that we are capable of failure; indeed, we risk - and, for the sake of growth, must risk - failure on an on-going basis if we are to develop. Being a Bahá'í provides no exemption from risk as an inherent part of human existence. Thus, the refusal to undertake risks for self-actualization is, in effect, a refusal to be oneself which is itself a refusal to be, or, even worse, an outright rejection of oneself. In flight from our possibilities, we fall away from ourselves and. consequently, never become authentically real in our proper identities. Lacking what Paul Tillich calls "the courage to be" (The Courage to Be) one can easily attain succumb to the feeling "of being condemned - not to an external punishment but to the despair of having lost our destiny" (ibid., 59). If we are not ourselves, who are we?

13) Fallen Existence

In Heidegger's terms, we develop a 'fugitive way of saying 'I' " (BT, 368) which is "motivated by Dasein's [human] falling; for as falling, it flees in the face of itself into the 'they'." (ibid.). Even though this 'I' seems normal enough to outsiders and even ourselves, "[w]hen the 'I' talks in the 'natural' manner, this is performed by the they-self" (ibid.), that is, the mass ('Das Man') or crowd identity we inevitably take on when our lives are not filled with genuine content. The crowd speaks and acts through us; we have been appropriated by the crowd. As Heidegger puts it, "It itself is not; Being has been taken away by the Others" (BT, 164) although this "inconspicuous domination" (ibid.) may not always be obvious. As a result, "[o]ne belongs to the Others oneself and enhances their power" (ibid.) by becoming "dispersed into the 'they' " (BT, 167). We have "fallen away" (BT, 220) from our true possibilities and suffer from "alienation [Entfremdung] in which [our] ownmost potentiality-for-Being is hidden from [us]" (BT, 222). Heidegger, like all existentialists philosophers, rejects this kind of inauthentic existence. So do the Bahá'í Writings which make each of us responsible for our own actions and do not allow us to slough off responsibility for our lives on others. "If, in the Day when all the peoples of the earth will be gathered together, any man should, whilst standing in the presence of God, be asked: "Wherefore hast thou disbelieved in My Beauty and turned away from My Self," and if such a man should reply and say: "Inasmuch as all men have erred, and none hath been found willing to turn his face to the Truth, I, too, following their example, have grievously failed to recognize the Beauty of the Eternal," such a plea will, assuredly, be rejected. For the faith of no man can be conditioned by any one except himself" (Gleanings, LXXV, 143; italics added). In other words, there is no

refuge and no flight from personal responsibility in the mass or what Heidegger calls the "they-self" (BT, 368). Each is expected to be an authentic 'thyself' and not someone else; this challenges us all with the duty to actualize our unique combination of potentials. Furthermore, the Writings exhort each of us to "see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others" (TB, 37) and to "know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbour" (ibid.). We cannot see with our own eyes and know through our own knowledge if we are not first authentically ourselves. That is why we need to be what Heidegger calls "resolute" (BT, 443): "Resoluteness constitutes the loyalty of existence to its own Self" (ibid.).

Lest any misunderstandings arise, it is necessary to point out that neither existentialism nor the Bahá'í Writings envision humans as totally detached from
the world and their fellow beings. The issue is not so much attachment as the quality of attachment, that is, whether or not attachment is authentic. Indeed, the Writings instruct us to "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements" (Gleanings, CVI, 213). A clearer injunction for positive involvement with the world cannot be imagined. However, it is obvious that we cannot be genuinely concerned for the needs of our time if we fail to self-actualize and become part of the mass, or 'They' whose needs require our care. Nor can our anxious concern "for the needs of the age" (ibid.) be genuine if we are merely working out personal problems in the public arena. Thus, seeking appropriate self-actualization of our possibilities is not a selfish act but is the necessary first step in meeting the "needs of the age [we] live in" (ibid.) and one that is often forgotten. To genuinely help the age we must think for ourselves (TB, 37) because if we don't, we simply become part of the problem and obscure the issues. Heidegger makes a similar point: "If Dasein discovers the world in its own way [eigens] and brings it close, if it discloses itself to itself its authentic Being, then this discovery of the 'world' and this disclosure of Dasein are always accomplished as a clearing-away of concealments and obscurities . . . " (BT, 167). Gabriel Marcel for his part describes this social existence of humankind as our "intersubjectivity" (MB, Vol. 2, 39).

Furthermore, being resolute, or avoiding "fallen-ness" (BT, 220) is also a socially beneficial act since a genuine community in which genuine consultation occurs, can only be found among people who are authentically themselves, and see with their own eyes and speak their own thoughts. The best way for us to help create such a community is to be such a person ourselves which is precisely what the Bahá'í Writings demand. As Heidegger writes, "Dasein's resoluteness towards itself is what first makes it possible to let Others who are with it be in their ownmost potentiality-for-being, and to co-disclose this potentiality in the solicitude which leaps forth and liberates . . . Only by authentically Being-their--Selves in resoluteness can people authentically be with one another - not by ambiguous and jealous stipulations"

and talkative fraternizing in the "they" . . . " (BT, 344-5). By self-actualizing, each of us attains the authentic being that lets us serve as an example for others.

14) Anxiety

The fact that we are always susceptible "falling" (BT, 399) into inauthentic being makes a certain amount of anxiety structurally inherent in human existence. For Heidegger, the anxiety provoked by this prone-ness to falling is the origin of the conscience, since the experience of anxiety is the sign of having or developing a conscience. Thus we should welcome anxiety because it is proof of "wanting-to-have-a-conscience" (BT, 342) which ultimately helps us to gain, preserve and regain our authenticity as we go through life. It is precisely this anxiety which eventually helps us attain that "resoluteness . . . [which is] that truth of Dasein which is most primordial because it is authentic" (BT, 343). Such anxiety is a natural part of being ourselves and we would, in fact, not be well off if this natural anxiety were absent since that would lower our level of concern about our existential condition. The resulting carelessness would not serve us well neither as individuals nor as a community. Clearly, this anxiety is not to be understood as a kind of panic but rather as what Abdu'l-Bahá calls "due concern" (SDC, 11). In the same way, Bahá'u'lláh tells us that we should feel "concern" (Gleanings, CXX, 254; also CXLIVII, 316) "only for that which profiteth mankind, and bettereth the condition thereof (ibid.). As we have already seen, concern for improving the human condition includes self-actualization of one's potentialities and the attainment of authentic identity. From this we can see that the Bahá'í Writings accept a certain amount
of anxiety and concern as an inevitable part of the human condition This idea is also inherent in the notion that eventually "Ye shall, most certainly, return to God, and shall be called to account for your doings in the presence of Him Who shall gather together the entire creation..." (Gleanings, CXVI, 247; see also LXV, 124). This idea is further emphasized by the injunction to "weigh in that Balance thine actions every day, every moment of thy life. Bring thyself to account ere thou art summoned to a reckoning, (Gleanings, CXIV, 236; italics added). In other words, there is a kind of salutary and growth-promoting anxiety that we must not only learn to live with but accept as a positive part of the human condition. Because this kind of existential anxiety serves a positive life-enhancing function for individuals and communities, it must not be confused with the debilitating fears and phobias that prevent personal and social life from being lived to their full potential.

Anxiety not only reveals the continuing possibility of inauthentic existence, it also discloses our situation in the world. According to Heidegger, in anxiety we face our "ownmost-Being-thrown" (BT, 393), that is, confront the fact that we simply exist and that there is no humanly discernible or rational reason why this should be so. We simply are, and find ourselves

be-ing: "Dasein has been thrown into existence" (BT, 321; italics added). Sartre also uses this term (BN, 53). It is precisely on this point that the Bahá'í Writings offer an alternative direction in the development of existentialism. Rather than seeing humankind as "thrown" (ibid.) into existence, a view that in the case of Sartre and Camus, leads to the judgment that existence is somehow absurd and inherently meaningless, the Bahá'í Writings view man and indeed, the entire universe as called into being (Prayers and Meditations, 177; 208; 251; Gleanings, XIV, 29; XCIV, 193; CXXII, 260). The view that we are "thrown" into existence is a consequence of failing to take into account the fact that the universe and all its inhabitants are the creations of a supreme Being who called everything into being for a particular purpose in the evolutionary world process. We only feel "thrown" when foreshorten our vision and ignore the existence of God. Whereas "thrown" connotes a disorderly, haphazard, undignified and even violent arrival which might easily lead to sense of worthlessness, carelessness and despair, being called suggests that each thing is wanted, has a place and a task, is invested with the natural dignity and possesses inherent value. Contrary to superficial expectations this does not ease the challenges that we face. Indeed, it intensifies them because being inauthentic is not just being untrue to ourselves but is also a rebellion against God's will. God's call is to a particular person who must not squander this call by trying to be someone else; it is issued to our authentic potentials. We must not "flee[] to the relief which comes with the supposed freedom of the they-self" (BT, 321). Nor can we dismiss this call as absurd since God has His reasons in each case. This fact is emphasized by the Bab's prayer which states that "All are His servants and all abide by His bidding" (Bahá'í Prayers).In other words, human existence is inherently meaningful even though we do not always actualize this meaning successfully. This is one issue on which a Bahá'í existentialism differs radically from the atheistic existentialism of Sartre and Camus.

15) Not-belonging

Anxiety also reveals our human condition as " 'not-at-home' - the bare 'that-it-is' in the 'nothing' of the world" (BT, 321). Unlike other entities and creatures, humans are not fully at home in the world insofar as we possess conscious capabilities other creatures lack. We cannot live with the sensual contentedness of a cow, nor, as Abdu'l-Bahá noted, should we because to
do so means not actualizing our true potentials (PUP, 262). Through their emphasis on detachment from the world, the Bahá'í Writings also emphasize
that humankind neither is nor should ever be as at home in the world as animals. "[T]he contingent world is the source of imperfections" (SAQ, 5) and humans should be focussed on divine perfections. Indeed, relative to the divine perfections we are intended to actualize, the world is as 'nothing' and we must neither over-value nor undervalue it. In one sense, the world is certainly an illusion, a mirage, a nothing (SAQ, 278), and, if we foreshorten our vision to exclude God, we will indeed find ourselves "thrown"

into nothingness or into a meaningless, seething mass of being (see Sartre's Nausea). This feeling of not-being-at-home or not-belonging (often unsatisfactorily translated as "uncanniness" [BT, 321]) is something that all Bahá'ís can recognize and which the Writings, to a certain extent, approve (Paris Talks, 85; SAQ, 278). Our recognition of the situation in which we are in but not fully of nature, readily leads to anxiety about our true place, our 'home' and our belonging. One of the reasons for the arrival of Manifestations is to alleviate this structurally inherent anxiety and to help us direct this emotional energy to the divine world where we really belong. That, after all, is why we have a soul which survives our physical being and undergoes an eternity of spiritual evolution. However, the feeling of not-being-at-home is something that is structurally inherent in our existence and is something we continuously have to learn to live with. After all, it plays a positive role in reminding us that in the long run, we do not really belong here.

16) Resoluteness and the Call Into Being

The issues of resoluteness, anxiety and "the call into being" (Gleanings, XIV, 29) lead naturally to what we might refer to as the 'call of being', namely the fact that through anxiety, we hear "the call of conscience [that] summons us to our potentiality-for-Being" (BT, 347). This has two consequences. First, anxiety reveals our freedom to choose for or against the actualization of our possibilities (BT, 237); it discloses the fact that human be-ing is "characterized by freedom" (ibid.), a view that underlies the foundation of all Bahá'í ethics. This freedom which can, of course, be frightening because it marks the beginning of responsibilities for the conduct of one's life. Second, through anxiety, conscience summons us to an authentic existence by calling on us to self-actualization. "When the call of conscience is understood, lostness in the 'they' is revealed. Resoluteness brings Dasein back to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-itself" (BT, 354). The call of conscience "calls Dasein forth (and forward) to its ownmost possibilities, as a summons to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-Self" (BT, 318). However, where does this call come from, especially since it is often "against our expectations and even against our will" (BT, 320)? According to Heidegger, "[t]he call comes from me and yet from beyond me and over me" (ibid.). In other words, "the call of conscience" (BT, 347) originates as a call from our unactualized potentials, projecting the influence of their presence into our lives; these unactualized potentials are our own future possible selves and their presence makes us uneasy about what we are doing with ourselves. Thus, "[i]n conscience Dasein calls itself" (BT, 320). However, the calls also comes from outside, a fact that Heidegger recognizes but is hard to explain since in Being and Time, he lacks recourse to God even though the existence of such a "Great Being" (TB, 162) is mandated by his analysis of the structure of human be-ing. The Bahá'í Writings suffer no such disadvantage, and can frankly assert that the call of being and the call

of conscience are one and same and are signs of God's action in the world through the anxious state of mind or "mood" (BT, 296). This fact does not lessen the call or make it somehow less pressing; rather, the opposite is true. By neglecting the call to authentic being, we are not merely choosing to live inauthentically, but are choosing to ignore the will of the Creator. However, while living in bad faith with oneself, that is, violating one's own essential nature can be written off as a private affair in a godless world, it is a more serious matter to compound it by rebellion against God's will.

At this point, a clarification is required. We must not make the mistake of taking Heidegger's call of conscience as something negative because it "discloses Dasein's most primordial potentiality-for-Being" as Being-guilty" (BT, 334).This call is "positive" (ibid.) insofar as the capacity to be guilty first requires a capacity, a freedom, a potential to choose authentic self-actualization. We cannot be guilty of failing to self-actualize without first having the potential to do so. Thus, anxiety and guilt are positive insofar as they attest to the possibility of self-actualization: conscience is "intelligible as an attestation of Dasein's ownmost potentiality-for-Being" (BT, 324). Indeed, these feelings of guilt allow us to be "summoned out of one's lostness in the 'they' "(BT, 445).

17) A Problem With Conscience

However, even this positive view of the call of conscience still leaves us - and Heidegger's philosophy - with a problem: is conscience by itself actually capable of empowering us to return from our fallen state back into authenticity? As John Macquarrie says, conscience "can at best awaken in fallen man the awareness of lost possibility of being. It can disclose to him his ontological possibility of authenticity. But it cannot by any means empower him to choose that possibility" ((An Existentialist Theology, 139; italics added). He adds, "And now it appears that only some Power outside man, some Power not fallen as man is fallen, can bring man to this concrete possibility of regaining his authentic being" (ibid.). The mere awareness of our fallen state is not in itself enough to enable us to lift ourselves out of it; the inability to help ourselves despite our knowledge is an integral part of our inauthentic existence. This means that we require external aid to empower us to take the steps needed to recover authentic being. Although other human beings can fulfill that function to a certain extent, ultimately we require God, and God's "existentiell" (ibid.), that is, concrete appearance in history as the Manifestation to return to us in our fallen condition, the power to make choice for an authentic existence. As Bahá'u'lláh says, "Neither the candle nor the lamp can be lighted through their own unaided efforts, nor can it ever be possible for the mirror to free itself from its dross (Gleanings, XXVII, 66). God and the Manifestations restore our potential for authenticity to us. Of course, neither God nor the Manifestation actually make that choice for us but rather, they enable us to make the choice

for authentic being. That is why the physician metaphor plays such a prominent role in the Bahá'í Writings: what does a physician do except enable our body to recover its ability to function independently as it was originally intended to?

18) The Role of the Manifestation

One might, of course, also ask how the Manifestation fulfills His or Her role as an empowering physician. Undoubtedly the first step is to reorient ourselves, to become like the mirrors that turn to the sun and are thus empowered to its light (PUP, 4); there is, as Macquarrie says, "a complete re-orientation of the self" (ET, 187) which reverses the direction of the will so that we begin to polish the mirrors of our souls and, thereby, regain authenticity. The question remains as to how this re-orientation takes place; how does the fallen, inauthentic individual gain the power to re-orient himself to the Manifestation so as to empower himself to change. The Bahá'í Writings contain various exhortations to do so: Bahá'u'lláh says, "The whole duty of man in this Day is to attain that share of the flood of grace which God poureth forth for him" (Gleanings, V, 8) and Abdu'l-Bahá says, "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light (PUP, 14). These quotes suggest that we are able to achieve this by ourselves, as does the following: "There can be no doubt whatever that, in consequence of the efforts which every man may consciously exert and as a result of the exertion of his own spiritual faculties, this mirror can be so cleansed from the dross of earthly defilements . . . " (Gleanings, CXXIV, 261). It should be noted in passing that this latter quote does not contradict Bahá'u'lláh's previous statement about the impossibility of "unaided efforts" (Gleanings, XXVII,66) to cleanse the mirror or light the lamp, that is, re-orient us, because the effort we make, while not sufficient in itself, is the pre-condition for receiving the divine aid that allows us to achieve success.

However, we must still ask, how are individuals enabled to turn towards the sun or to even begin cleansing the mirror of their souls. The answer lies in the following quotations from Bahá'u'lláh: "This is the Day in which God's most excellent favors have been poured out upon men, the Day in which His most mighty grace hath been infused into all created things (Gleanings, V, 6); "Its [The Name of God] grace is being poured out upon men" (Gleanings, IX, 12); and finally, "Whatever duty Thou hast prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves (Gleanings, I, 4-5; italics added). These quotations make it clear that all human beings have been divinely endowed with the power

and freedom to re-orient themselves to God. This power and freedom is an inherent part of the structure of human existence and can, therefore, not be removed or lost: it is always available, which is why Bahá'u'lláh tells us that
"he faith of no man can be conditioned by any one except himself" (Gleanings, LXXV, 143). In other words, power and the resulting freedom are innately bestowed on human nature and cannot be avoided or lost. Part of the anxiety of inauthentic existence is that even the most self-alienated person retains a vestigal awareness of his or her power and freedom to choose authenticity. On this score, a Bahá'í existentialism is as radical an exponent
of human freedom as Sartre according to whom we are always able to choose between living in good or "bad faith" (BN, 59). If we ask, about what can make people want to re-orient towards God, even if they know, as the Writings assure us, God's grace or empowerment is shed on all beings alike (Gleanings, X, 12), we have no answer but the mystery of human freedom. Like Berdyaev's "Ungrund" (The Destiny of Man, 25), the human spirit is, at bottom, a radical freedom that is unfathomable to anyone else save God.

19) "Being-Toward-Death"

Because we are continuously changing (SAQ, 233), it follows that our identities are continuously dying as we cast aside outmoded, no longer adequate selves in order actualize new possibilities. This is one way in which human beings are what Heidegger calls "Being-towards-death" (BT, 310) since we are, in fact, constantly striving to re-invent ourselves. We die daily, indeed, during periods of challenging, rapid growth or, at times of crisis, hourly or even from moment to moment. It is one of the great paradoxes of human existence that dying is our most authentic way of life. In the words of Abdu'l-Bahá, "Until a being setteth his foot in the plane of sacrifice, he is bereft of every favour and grace; and this plane of sacrifice is the realm of dying to the self, that the radiance of the living God may then shine forth. The martyr's field is the place of detachment from self, that the anthems of eternity may be upraised" (SWAB, 76). We thus live in perpetual anticipation of death, of which the death of the physical body is only one. Indeed, the Bahá'í Writings encourage the daily practice of "Being-towards-death" (BT, 310) when they tell us to "weigh in that Balance thine actions every day, every moment of thy life. Bring thyself to account ere thou art summoned to a reckoning " (Gleanings, CXIV, 236).

However, we must not let fear, based on a false understanding, drive us into despair. This is a challenge because death reveals itself to us through anxiety (BT, 310) which emphasizes for us that death is always personal; death "individualizes Dasein" (ibid.) as Heidegger says. "In this state-of-mind, Dasein finds itself face to face with the "nothing . . . " (ibid.). As Heidegger points out, this anxiety has a positive function insofar as it means that we have consciously understood and personally appropriated our ontological situation. Anxiety is the sign that we 'get it'. Though this "nothing" (ibid.)

is quite real and, to the self, can be quite frightening, the fact remains that in a universe in which we constantly actualize new potentials, this "nothing" exists from the point of view of the self that is about to be replaced by its successor. The anxiety is real and should not be denied, but rather must be put into its proper ontological perspective. Paradoxically, the anxiety announces both the death pangs of one self and the birth pangs of another. There is cause for some sorrow - as when, for example, we leave childhood behind - while at the same time, there is cause for joyous as well as apprehensive anticipation. Once again, we can see how the Bahá'í Writings lead us to a more accurate and more positive understanding of our existential situation.

20) "Being-Toward-Death" and Freedom

Once understood and appropriated for oneself, "Being-towards-death" (ibid.) is also a source of ontological freedom because it frees us from any undue attachment to former versions of ourselves. There is no point in holding on to a version of oneself that, if things go well and real growth occurs, is doomed to pass out of existence. At this point, we cannot help but remember Bahá'u'lláh's statement, "I have made death a messenger of joy to thee. Wherefore dost thou grieve? I made the light to shed on thee its splendor. Why dost thou veil thyself therefrom?" (The Hidden Words, #32). Death is "a messenger of joy" because the dying of one identity is a pre-requisite for a more adequate identity, just as our physical dying is a pre-requisite for entrance into the Abha Kingdom. It is the death that precedes a birth and a life of encountering opportunities.

21) Evolutionary Humility

These facts provide an ontological basis for encouraging what we might call 'evolutionary humility', the realization that we are, at best, partial, certainly not our best, nor, given an eternity of development ahead of us, even 'very good'. If we view ourselves from the viewpoint of eternity, we are bound to feel very inadequate. In other words, the Bahá'í teachings about the importance of humility are not simply matters of sentiment or social philosophy but have deep ontological roots. We may respond either hide this feeling and its causes from ourselves and thus live inauthentically or, we may face the fact and feel a deep inner necessity for renewing our efforts to evolve by working harder to actualize our potentials.

This rather sober view must be balanced with the understanding that we human beings are, collectively and individually, on a voyage without end, an eternal voyage of discovery in which ever new aspects of ourselves are disclosed to ourselves and in which we disclose ever-new aspects of creation (SAQ, ch.62). The fact that we are perpetually incomplete beings with an eternity of potentials yet to be realized not only humbles us, but should also inspire hope because no act is ever the final judgment on us. What others see in this world, and perhaps even our own feelings notwithstanding, we are never just what we seem. This means that our transgressions are not final in the sense that they sum up what we are since there is always more to us, if not in this world, then

in the next. We are not simply the sum total of our deeds and thoughts but also the more that lies ahead of us. In regard to this 'more', human being is always, as Heidegger says, "ahead-of-itself" (BT, 279); he adds, that "in Dasein [human beings] there is always something still outstanding" (ibid.). Also noteworthy here is the future orientation which shows itself to be an integral part of the ontological structure of our existence. We are, as Heidegger says, a "Being towards" (BT, 197).

22) Being an "Inexhaustible Mystery"

Another way of viewing our inherent incompleteness is to say that we are an "inexhaustible mystery" (Existentialism, 29). As the Writings say, "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value" (Gleanings, CXXII, 260; see also SAQ, chp. 64). Consequently, human beings are always mysterious to themselves, and experience themselves as a mystery, as something that by its very nature can never be fully understood. No amount of factual information can ever provide exhaustive knowledge of even a single person, for, as the Bahá'í Writings say, "Man is My mystery, and I am his mystery" (Gleanings, XC, 177). This is also what the theistic existentialist Gabriel Marcel is getting at in the title of his two volume The Mystery of Being and this is precisely the main point of Kierkegaard's entire oeuvre and his objection to Hegel: human beings are inherently mysterious and cannot be adequately summed up by any abstract, intellectualized system (MB, Vol. 1, 164). How we personally experience our mysteriousness can vary greatly. Some, like the Russian theistic existentialist Nicolas Berdyaev, experience it as an utterly inexplicable irrationality that proves our absolute freedom and creativity beyond any rational, logical limitations (Truth and Revelation, 77); others, such as the French atheist existentialists Sartre and Camus experience it as further evidence of our inherent absurdity. Negatively, it might even be experienced as something frightful or even terrifying since whatever is inexhaustible might also be felt as an abyss. Others might experience this mysteriousness with a sense of awe and humility or even gratitude that we have been so richly endowed. Perhaps most interestingly, this inner "inexhaustible mystery" (Existentialism, 29) might be experienced as an profound inner emptiness - an emptiness that is, paradoxically, also profoundly full of endless potentials. This line of thought draws an existential understanding of the Bahá'í Writings closer to Buddhism and Taoism.

Our incompleteness is also the source of our inherent creativity as we struggle to find new and more adequate ways to actualize our potentials in the midst of an ever-changing world. This means that we are inherently creative beings who are continuously bringing novelty into this world by manifesting potentials that have previously been hidden. Indeed, humankind also creatively serves cosmic evolution and reveals novelties by bringing out the hidden potentials of matter in our various inventions (SAQ, 186). Consequently, in an authentic existence we are first of all self-creators, beings who fashion their personal identities from their own combination of potentials and circumstances.

In that sense we may consider ourselves as the authors of the 'novels' of our lives wherein each day is a new page that we write. Out of our individual struggles to 'be more', the arts and sciences develop as we work to actualize our expressive and intellectual potentials to an ever greater degree.

23) Creativity and Freedom

Because creativity requires the choices about how to use (or not use or mis-use) these potentials, our incomplete nature is, therefor, another source of our freedom. It is an axiom of all forms of existentialism that humankind possesses freedom, that is, individuals have the freedom to create themselves by means of their own choices. Indeed, some existentialists such as Sartre go so far as to deny the very existence of a human nature because that would restrict our freedom to be true self-creators who can take full responsibility for their choices. This, according to Sartre, is the meaning of saying that existence precedes essence. Sartre, of course, has never come satisfactorily to terms with the fact that his entire magnum opus, Being and Nothingness, is a study of the underlying and inherent structure of all "pour-soi", that is, human existence, and that this structure, in effect, functions as an essence imposed upon all human beings. Be that as it may, a Bahá'í existentialism does
not go to Sartre's extreme. As already demonstrated, the Bahá'í Writings maintain that there is a human nature and that we freely make our moral, self-constituting choices within the framework it provides. For example, simply by being born human, we are endowed with an immortal rational soul in addition to our animal natures. This endowment makes certain choices appropriate and inappropriate for us - although it is clear that we are able to choose unwisely and inappropriately (SAQ, 248). Each of these choices make up what we might call our 'volitional selves', that is, the identities built up on the basis of choosing to actualize particular human and/or animal potentials. In the Bahá'í view, we are not free to determine our human nature but, more importantly, we are free to personally create our volitional selves by means of choices. Paradoxically, we are not merely free to do so but are morally required to do so, thus adding Bahá'í assent to Sartre's proposition that we are "condemned to be free" (SARTRE .....). Those who wish to escape this fate and live "inauthentically" or in "bad faith" (BN, 56) can only do so by escaping into excessive attachment to the world, and allowing the dictates of the crowd, or mass to determine their lives for them. Marcel's rather striking way of pointing this out is to say that "we are all tending to become bureaucrats, and not only of our outward behavior, but in our relations with ourselves" (MB, Vol. 1, 112).

24) Man and Super-man

The fact that we - both collectively and individually - are essentially incomplete beings, provides a logical basis for the Bahá'í Faith's evolutionary
view of humankind for if it were possible for us to reach completion, then our evolution would stop. But such is not our nature as the Bahá'í Writings make

clear (SAQ, 233). A human being in the words of Marcel is "a wanderer, an itinerant being, who cannot come to absolute rest except by a fiction, a fiction which it is the duty of philosophic reflection to oppose with all its strength" (MB, Vol., 164). The end of change and development would, in effect mean that we had a new essence. However, as the Writings tell us (SWAB, 132; SAQ, 184) the human essence cannot change even though it may change its outward, phenomenal form just as coal may become a diamond (SAQ, 234) without changing its nature as carbon. Thus, we are innately incomplete beings, a fact also emphasized by the teaching of an eternity of personal evolution that wait us in the life after death. When we understand ourselves as essentially incomplete beings at the species level, it becomes obvious that each point in our species development is only a transition, a temporary phase to a still higher level of development. In other words, we today are only a bridge to something better and more advanced than ourselves, a fact that should inspire a sense of evolutionary humility. Indeed, our task is to reach the next stage of development as rapidly as we can, which means, in effect, to actualize our next highest potential and, thereby, make our current selves obsolete. We must, in short, understand ourselves as just a phase we're going through! This understanding of our species as well as our individual existences bears obvious affinities to Nietzsche's theory of the super-man or Uebermensch since in both views, humans regard themselves as a transition to something better (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Bk. Four). Of course, whereas Bahá'ís and Nietzsche agree that the new 'super-man' has a superior intellect (SWAB,141) and moral system (SWAB, 136), they will not necessarily agree on the content of this new moral system. However, it cannot be denied that the evolutionary outlook inherent in the Bahá'í Writings leads to a vision of becoming a type of human superior to what we are today although we can never exceed our ontological human status. It should also be noted in passing that this evolutionary view also follows logically from the Bahá'í Teaching that all things are perpetually in motion (SAQ, 233). If we are part of a line of development, any particular place in the line, is a transitional phase to the next point. This, too, gives rise to a view of current humankind as a transitional being.

It bears pointing out that even an atheist existentialist such as Sartre recognizes this self-transcendent function in human beings, that is, the notion that ultimately human beings want to be more than what they currently are. In Sartre's rather extreme view, human beings want to be God, even though this project is, by definition bound to fail. We are, in Sartre's memorable phrase "a useless passion" (BN quoted in The Existentialists, 78). Thus God - although according to Sartre, no such entity actually exists - returns to philosophy as the "object of desire" as Aristotle calls the First Mover. Not only does this, a la Schleiermacher, reverse the usual theological categories and make God our creation but also dooms humankind to frustration in the face of its own creation.

Understanding and accepting our "itinerant condition" (MB, Vol. 1, 164) as transitional figures provides a logical and scientific basis for the

Faith's profound metaphysical optimism. If we are only transient beings, then, for starters, we must not take ourselves too seriously, because at any given stage, we are only something to be overcome for something better. There is no reason to despair at this - we are, after all, on the way to an improvement - but at the same time, there is no reason for self-satisfaction let alone smugness. Indeed, hope is an inherent part of the structure of human be-ing since there are an infinity of new possibilities to actualize.

25) Traveler Ethics

Not taking ourselves too seriously, that is, not taking ourselves as the final endpoint for evolution, is also the rational basis for tolerance of others. This allows the Bahá'í Faith to present tolerance not 'merely' as a matter of sentiment and good feeling but to present it as a rational, indeed, scientific response to human diversity. No individual is ever at their last stage of development; everyone is a "mental traveler" (Blake) on the way to something else and if we can see a person is stuck in a negative mode, we seek to find ways of helping him to move on from it. (A mundane observation: if a car with a flat tire is blocking the road, helping the driver fix it is the best way to continue your own travels.) The fact that we all inherently incomplete also provides a rational basis for an evolutionary modesty. Modesty is not simply a nice that smoothes social relations, but is also a rational response to our actual position in the species and our personal evolutionary process. Finally, it bears pointing out that understanding ourselves as beings in transit and in perpetual change leads inevitably to varying degrees of good humor, a good humor based not so much on temperament as on a metaphysical awareness that we are inherently designed to improve. This cannot help but remind us of the on-going laughter of Nietzsche's super-man Zarathustra and, indeed, of the figure of the laughing Buddha in the East.

Understanding ourselves as transitional figures has profound implications for living. It provides a logical and scientific basis for the Bahá'í teaching about the usefulness of tests and challenges. They are, indeed, necessary in order for us to actualize our higher moral potentials for which reason for which reason one of our prayers reads, "O Thou Whose tests are a healing medicine to such as are nigh unto Thee ..." (Prayers and Meditations, CXXXIII, 220). Those who understand our transitional nature will immediately see why this not only is but must be so since without challenges there can be no growth (Paris Talks, 51). In fact, we will find that it is often through difficult challenges that we make the most progress in actualizing our various possibilities. This not only affects our attitude but also trains our minds to become aware of and actively seek out the opportunities that arrive with many problems.

However, there is also a serious challenge to any and all ethical systems if we are essentially transitional figures or travelers: what is the point of 'being true' to someone or a principle in a world of perpetual flux? Indeed, can there even be such a thing as 'being true' in a Heraclitean world? The great American

philosophical poet, Conrad Aiken, one of the themes with which he grappled for over sixty years. After a long search, he finally decided that the answer lay in repeatability: we are able to choose what we wish to repeat in our lives and, thereby, preserve them. This provides constancy amid the Heraclitean flux. Both Heidegger and Marcel grappled with the issue and came to similar conclusions. Heidegger's solution lies in "resoluteness" (BT, 443), in "revering the repeatable possibilities of existence" (ibid.). What he means is that we are able to choose for ourselves, or appropriate at least some of the things that we wish to see repeated. Our choices, each "fateful repetition" (BT, 447) helps form constants in the lives we shape for ourselves. In a similar vein, Marcel writes of "creative fidelity" (The Philosophy of Existentialism, 34) as "the active recognition of something permanent, not formally, after the manner of a law, but ontologically; in this sense, it refers invariably to a presence or to something which can be maintained within us and before us as a presence, but which, ipso facto can just as well be ignored, forgotten and obliterated . . ." (ibid.). The Bahá'í Writings espouse a similar view. Instead of using "resoluteness" (Heidegger) and "creative fidelity" (Marcel) they refer to "steadfastness" which is extolled throughout the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá. This virtue is given such a high place and so much attention because being steadfast, the choice of a repeatable possibility, or "the active perpetuation of presence" (PE, 36) is the only way of set a foundation on morals in a flux. We cannot simply always follow "the next new thing" (BT, 443).

According to Marcel, when we practice "creative fidelity" (PE, 38), that is, we make ourselves "available" for the other or the presence of the other which allows the other to be with me (see Heidegger's "Mitsein", being-with, BT, 514) and thus allow him or her direct participation in our lives. As Marcel explains, the subjects of 'presence' and 'availability' are related because we cannot make ourselves available to someone or something not genuinely present in our lives. This 'other' is not as a thing or a "case" (PE, 41) but rather a being that, to some extent at least, displaced our concern with ourselves. "To be incapable of presence is to be in some manner not only preoccupied but encumbered with one's own self" (ibid.). Being available or "at the disposal of others" (PE, 43) is also an indispensable part of Bahá'í ethics. We are not only to be "anxiously concerned for the needs of the age [we] live in" (Gleanings, CVI, 213) but also to be available to others in their various needs (SWAB, 24) and act as physicians to individuals and humankind in general.

26) The Principle of Hope

Because each of us is a "for-the-sake-of-which" (BT, 119) we can see that human being is future-oriented, and naturally looks forward into that which is not yet, and, indeed, looks forward to events that have not yet

happened and may never happen. In working to actualize our potentials, we are working towards ourselves as we do not yet exist but so far exist only in hope. Thus, hope is also an integral part of the structure of human being or human nature (See Marcel, "A Metaphysic of Hope" in Homo Viator ; also Ernst Bloch's 3 volume, The Principle of Hope). Without actualizing our capacity for hope, we not only remain incomplete beings because we lack the future orientation, the "for-the-sake-of-which" (BT, 119) that is an inherent part of our being. Closely related to hope is 'faith', which is also an integral and unavoidable part of our being. That is why even the most stringent attempts to root faith out of our lives inevitably drag it in through the back door. Indeed, it is not too much to say that no one actually lives without faith; the differences among people arise because they choose to actualize their capacity for faith differently. Realizing this can not only help us understand ourselves (Where do I really actualize my capacity for faith?) but also the way we teach, for example, an apparent atheist.

27) Authenticity

Because we are a "Being-in-the-world" (BT, 236), we can only exist in full authenticity if we have an intimate and authentic relationship to the world in which we live. As Bahá'u'lláh says, "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements." (Gleanings, CVI, 213). Concern for the needs - as distinct from the wants and preferences - of the age is the most intimate and authentic way to engaging with our world-as-a-whole, and must not to be confused with relating intimately and authentically to the needs of individuals we encounter. Both and not one or the other are necessary to a full, engaged and authentic existence that actualizes the complete range of our social potentialities. Heidegger recognizes the possibilities for authentic engagement with the world under the rubric of 'care' which he characterizes not only as authentic being-toward-one's-own-possibilities but also as "Being-in-the-world" (BT, 236) and "being-with" (BT, 163). He says that "Being-in-the-world is essentially care" (BT, 237) and describes "care as the Being of Dasein" (BT, 241). Thus care in its social dimension, that is, our "concern and solicitude" (BT, 238) for our co-inhabitants on the earth is an integral part of our being and cannot be avoided if we wish to develop authentically. However, unlike Bahá'u'lláh, Heidegger does not specifically explain what characterizes authentic "Being-in-the-world".

28) The Primacy of Bahá'u'lláh in Our Age

At this point we begin to see the shape of an 'existential proof' for the primacy of Bahá'u'lláh for our age. The greatest single need of our age of potential global mass destruction is peace; and the way to peace is through unity and the way to unity can only lie through inclusivity. The most comprehensive teachings on inclusivity on the planet today are those of Bahá'u'lláh and for that and that reason alone, His path represents the most

authentic mode-of-being available in the world today. Indeed, from this point of view, it is even conceivable that atheists, motivated by good will towards humanity and recognizing the need for unity and inclusion, can join the Bahá'í
Faith while mentally setting aside, or 'bracketing' (Husserl) the religious aspects as temporary accommodations they are prepared to accept in order to facilitate those not yet ready to abandon religious beliefs. For such persons to become Bahá'ís is an existential gamble - not entirely unlike Pascal's famous wager on the existence of God - necessitated by their recognition of the deepest need of the age. If they are wrong, no harm, and probably much great good is done; if they are right, they have not only helped this age but also helped themselves to a more authentic and self-actualizing existence in the Abha Kingdom.

29) The Volitional Personality

Although we have advanced some way in our analysis of a Bahá'í existentialism,
the fact is we can go much deeper. To illustrate this possibility, let us examine the issue of free will more closely. According to the Bahá'í Writings,
humankind is endowed with free will (SAQ, 248) which, in practical terms means, we define, that is, create ourselves by the choices we make. This has immediate consequences for a Bahá'í existentialism because it means we must carefully qualify Sartre's dictum that existence precedes essence. From the perspective of the Writings this is true only so far as our volitional, that is, chosen personality is concerned, since our choices did not exist before we made them. Nonetheless, those choices are made in the context of having a specifically human nature that is capable of making such choices in the first place. Thus, generically speaking, we do have a human nature that is given to us but we do not have a personal identity made by our choices. The personality based on our choices - and, according to the Writings, the personality we shall judge in the Abha Kingdom - does not exist until we have chosen which of our generically human potentials to actualize.

It must be emphasized that this secondary volitional essence or personality is formed entirely of our free choices, and is not given to us at the outset either by God or other human beings. And indeed, from this point of view we are, in Sartre's memorable phrase "condemned to be free" (The Existentialists, 80) because, paradoxically, we have no choice but to make the choices that form ourselves. Even refusing to choose is a choice in this situation. As we make these choices, we gradually come into existence by forming ourselves, building up a pattern, a self or personality, or a volitional essence, which does not exist until it is actually built. Thus, from the point of view of the volitional self, we are self-created and truly sui generis, our own makers and, therewith, the architects of our own destiny. Even more radically, each one of us is our own god, in the sense that not even God can make our self-forming choices for us since to do so would be to deny our

unique human freedom and with it, our responsibility. The denial of responsibility would, of course, destroy the foundation of the Bahá'í ethical system which makes people responsible for their own actions. In regard to humankind's self-creating choices; God voluntarily limits His actions and allows a clearing in which human freedom can work. All this follows from the fact that our sheer existence - our ability to make choices - precedes our volitional essence. This far, at least, a Bahá'í existentialism can agree with
Sartre.

30) The Mystery of Self

Furthermore, this volitional self or essence is inherently mysterious insofar
as it does not exist before any choices are made, yet something is required to make the first choice. What is that something? We could speculate in any number of ways but the final result will always be that we cannot know, at least not intellectually in the manner of logical necessity or physical causality. This is because, in Marcel's terms, the self is a "mystery" (PE, 21-23) and a "problem" (ibid.). The difference between the two is clear cut: a problem is a difficulty that can be solved with the proper procedure or technique whereas a mystery cannot be solved at all. A "mystery [is} a problem which encroaches on its own data" (PE, 22), that is, a problem that does not allow us to study it objectively but irrevocably requires us to be involved: "I cannot place myself outside it or before it; I am engaged . . . " (ibid.). Our personal identity, the self is destined to remain a mystery in Marcel's sense because we cannot reflect on ourselves without involving ourselves. We become both subject and object simultaneously (see also MB, Vol. I, 106) and thus lose the prerequisites for an 'objective' view. Marcel also emphasizes this point when he writes that "my life is essentially ungraspable . . . it eludes me . . . " (MB, Vol. 1, 210; see also 168, 169).

Nothing in the Bahá'í Writings takes exception to Marcel's view. However, according to them we are mysteries to ourselves and others because we are "called into being" (Gleanings, XIV, 29) by the inscrutable will of God (see Gleanings, CXXIV, 262) who, through Bahá'u'lláh has told us that "Man is My mystery, and I am his mystery " (Kitab-i-Iqan, 101; see also Gleanings, LXXXII, 160). In other words, we do not know why God has called us or others into being because "He shall not be asked of His doings. He, verily, is the All-Glorious, the Almighty" (Gleanings, CXIV, 239). At this point we have arrived at an inherent limit to rational inquiry; we cannot inquire about the reason's for God's will because all rational inquiry is based on either the law of non-contradiction or cause and effect and God transcends both of these laws. We can only say that God must have had His reasons which we are incapable of comprehending and then proceed to accept God's will: "Praise be to God, the loving believers also accept and remain submissive to God's Will, content with it, radiantly acquiescent, offering thanks" (SWAB, 18-19).

Of course, it is at precisely this point that atheist and non-theist and theist existentialists distinguish themselves from one another. Atheists such as Sartre and Camus are inclined to see our mysteriousness to others and ourselves as further proof that human existence is fundamentally 'absurd' and inherently senseless. On the other hand, a non-theist such as the Heidegger of Being and Time sees it as evidence that we find ourselves simply "thrown" into the world and must learn to accept our 'thrown-ness'. In Being and Time at least, he remains mute about the issue of a superior being. Some theist existentialists such as Marcel understand this mystery as a sign of there being aspects of human existence not susceptible to purely rational treatment; we do not need to deny reason, but we must learn where its natural limitations are. This is fundamentally the same position as the one adopted by the Bahá'í Writings, which espouse a form of moderate rationalism (See "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings").

The mystery of the self is reinforced by the Bahá'í Teaching that the inner essence of things is unknown and unknowable (SAQ, 220); things are known by their attributes but their essences are beyond the reach of human knowledge. This is especially true of the human soul: "Verily I say, the human soul is, in its essence, one of the signs of God, a mystery among His mysteries. It is one of the mighty signs of the Almighty, the harbinger that proclaimeth the reality of all the worlds of God. Within it lieth concealed that which the world is now utterly incapable of apprehending" (Gleanings, LXXXII, 160; italics added; see also Gleanings, LXXXIII, 165; XCV, 195). For this reason, 'mysteriousness to ourselves' is inherently structured into human existence and the only choice we really have is in deciding how to respond to it. This mystery is also a part of our essential nature because we are inherently 'works in progress', incomplete beings with an eternity of development ahead of them. It is, of course, up to us to choose whether we shall understand and experience this mystery as one of the signs of God's existence or as a sense of alienation and not belonging to oneself.

31) Self-Alienation

This sense of not belonging to oneself suggests that a certain sense of alienation is structurally inherent in human being. As Marcel writes, " from the moment when I start to reflect, I am bound to appear to myself as a, as it were, non-somebody . . . (MB, Vol. 1, 106). However, it can often intensify into a pathological state of alienation insofar as one is alienated from acting in one's own best interests. This idea underlies such injunctions as the following: "Suffer not yourselves to be wrapt in the dense veils of your selfish desires, inasmuch as I have perfected in every one of you My creation (Gleanings, LXXV, 143), "Every good thing is of God, and every evil thing is from yourselves" (Gleanings, LXXVII, 149) and "deprive not yourselves of the liberal effusions of His grace" (Gleanings, CI, 206). Each of these quotations suggests that human beings can be so alienated from

themselves that they act to inflict harm on themselves. From this point of view, the "call into being" (SWAB, 250) takes on a new dimension: in addition to being the call by which the original volitional self begins, it is also the call back into authenticity, the call to return to our true selves. Indeed, insofar as we do not really exist when we do not live authentically - a kind of 'substitute' lives in our place - the "call into being" (ibid.) is also a call to return to existence. If responded to, this call can be considered a kind of "second birth" (PUP, 332) in which we attain our true spiritual selves or what Abdu'l-Bahá calls "the world of the Kingdom" (ibid.). According to Heidegger, this "call says nothing which might be talked about, gives no information about events. The call, which can be identified with the call of conscience (BT, 335) points forward to Dasein's potentiality-for-Being and it does this as a call which comes from "uncanniness" (BT, 325). Thus, it is possible to experience one's alienation itself positively as a call to return to one's true self. Ignoring this call is a failure to hear oneself or, even worse, an outright refusal to do so and a rejection of oneself (BT, 223; 315).. This, of course, leads to inauthentic existence because one is leading a life that reflects the 'they' or the mass instead of one that reflects one's "ownmost" (BT, 224; 307) potentials.

Furthermore, from this point of view, it is evident that our lives are a 'departure and return' from and back to our true, spiritual selves because it is virtually inevitable that we fall away from ourselves at some time or another. Interestingly enough, it also becomes clear that we have an existential explanation or interpretation for the concept of re-incarnation: each fall from our true selves is, in effect, a death, and each return is a 're-birth'. Our ultimate goal, of course, is to achieve 'moksha', a freedom from this cycle of birth and death by not falling from our true selves at all. Our 're-birth' is simply a return into another round of inauthentic existence as an expression or extension of the crowd rather than as our true selves. As we struggle to free ourselves from our condition of being inauthentic and fallen into the world, we detach ourselves ('die') from the world until we are 're-born' to deal with the next set of challenges. Occasionally, a special individual such as Abdu'l-Bahá is able to live permanently in this detached condition and thus avoids being 're-born'. When, like Abdu'l-Bahá, they nonetheless choose to return to the world to help others to enlightenment, we call them 'bodhisattvas'.

32) The Mystery of Essence

Because things are known by their attributes and unknowable in their essence (SAQ, 220), it follows that to some extent we will always find ourselves situated in a world of things that are essentially mysterious to us. We cannot know them completely. Indeed, vis a vis essence, we are destined to remain mysterious even to ourselves despite the fact that we have direct interior experience of ourselves (SAQ, 220). Consequently, we are always

remote-from-ourselves (Heidegger, quoted in BN, 25); we live in perpetual anticipation for an ever fuller disclosure of ourselves. Given that we know only attributes and not essences, it is not surprising to find that we may feel a certain alienation from all things and thus not feel fully 'at home' in the world. We can choose to lament or resent this situation, or we can ask ourselves if, in fact, we were ever intended to feel fully at home in the world, and to live without a certain yearning for something more. In other words, is a certain feeling of not-belonging an inherent, structural component of human existence? The answer from the Bahá'í Writings and Heidegger seems to be positive. The Bahá'í Writings certainly suggest that such is the case. Their exhortations to become detached from the world (Gleanings, CXL, 306; XVII, 40; XXIX, 71; XLVI, 100; LXXVI, 149; Paris Talks, 74; SWAB, 86, 177, 186). Since Heidegger believes that a kind of inauthenticity results from being too attached to daily existence and becoming "absorbed" (BT, 163) in our "Being as everyday Being-with-one-another" (ibid.), we may conclude that he, too, advocates a certain degree of feeling unheimlich, not-at-home in the world as a requisite for authenticity. This feeling keeps a necessary distance between ourselves and the world. However, we must bear in mind that detachment does not mean a disinterest or lack of concern for the world; Bahá'u'lláh, after all, tells us to be "anxiously concerned for the needs of the age [we] live in" (Gleanings, CVI, 213) and Heidegger sees solicitude (BT, 237), an important aspect of the care in which Dasein reveals itself (BT, 227), as an integral part of our Being-in-the-world. Rather, it means that we must not see the world as the ultimate and final value in our lives; we must recognize that our relationship to "the things of this world" (Paris Talks, 18), meaning both concrete things and worldly affairs, must not be allowed to stand in the way of achieving personal authenticity or an authentic relationship to God. To paraphrase Christ, what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul (The New Testament, Mark, 8: 36-38).

33) Being-Between

Further reflection reveals that human existence is characterized by being-between. We are in the paradoxical position of waiting at the door of ourselves caught between eternal anxiety and hope as we ponder both hopefully and anxiously what we shall disclose about our essence. As individuals and as a species, we are in eternal evolutionary development and, therefore, always 'between' a point of departure and a port of arrival. Indeed, every arrival is simultaneously a leave-taking; human beings have always just left and never quite arrived. This being-between is reflected even in our situation in creation; according to the Bahá'í Writings, humankind is the mid-point between matter and spirit: "For the inner reality of man is a demarcation line between the shadow and the light, a place where the two seas meet; it is the lowest

point on the arc of descent, and therefore is it capable of gaining all the grades above" (SWAB, 130).We exist between animality and the divine (PUP, 67) and while our nature or essence can be refined, it can never change (SWAB, 132; SAQ, 177).

The tension that inevitably arises because of our being-between is one of the structural hallmarks of specifically human existence; other forms of being such as the mineral, vegetable and animal do not experience it. Consequently, there is no way for us to escape this tension without betraying our nature as human beings and living inauthentically, that is, not living our human lives but living an animal existence. The result will be that we will become lower than the animal (PUP, 309). However, to compensate for the additional challenges we face, God sends Manifestations Who offer guidance and choices in the conduct of our lives: "As to the human world: It is more in need of guidance and education than the lower creatures" (PUP, 77). In other words, if we choose, we can make our being-between into a privileged position, because, with correct guidance, we can enjoy the benefits and pleasures of material existence and, at the same time, carry on our spiritual development. By making the material serve the spiritual we, so to speak, have the best of both worlds.

Once we have recognized and accepted this feeling of not completely belonging in the world, we are in a position to choose how to interpret it and its role in our lives. We can, for example, choose to understand the distance implied by this feeling according to Sartre and see it as a vast nothingness between the volitional self we are, our essence and the world (BN, 29). Such a view understands this feeling as a negation that negates the value and certainty of the volitional self and all things in the world because every positive achievement is negated by the haunting presence of its unknowable essence. Nothing is ever good enough. However, we can choose to understand it as a sign as the sign of our freedom from the world, as the distance necessary to provide us with the freedom to act and choose.

34) The Necessity of Faith

The fact that the world is inherently mysterious to us because we know things only by their attributes and not directly by their inner essence (SAQ, 220) means that there are some kinds of things we are not able to know. Our knowledge, our science and our action are limited to the phenomenal level of reality and debarred from the noumenal realm which is the exclusive domain of God. This shows that the Bahá'í Writings espouse a moderate rationalism, that is, they recognize that while reasoned investigation and logic can tell us many things, they cannot tell us everything and certainly not everything we need to know to live appropriately as human beings. The key for a accurate epistemology is to know where to draw the line between the two because this distinction is the basis for asserting the existence of other, supra-rational ways of knowing. As the Writings tell us, we know by "faith and knowledge" (BWF, 382)

which are the " 'two wings' of the soul" (ibid.).

In Marcel's language, the difference between faith and knowledge is the difference between "believing that" (MB, Vol. 2, 86) and "believing in" (ibid.). The first is like a "conviction" (ibid.) of which we have complete intellectual certainty and which - here we are going beyond Marcel - is hedged round with all kinds of careful provisos and qualifications to preserve it from attack. "Believing in" (ibid.) however is something quite different. According to Marcel, it means "that I place myself at the disposal of something" (MB, Vol. 2, 87), that is, I make myself available to something or someone. In short, faith is the kind of knowledge we get when we willingly open ourselves to the other and give our assent (Marcel calls it a "pledge") to the knowledge gained in that way. Indeed, such knowledge "absorbs most fully all the powers of [our] being" (ibid.). It also affects our own being, that is, what we actually are as persons. We are, as the saying goes, 'touched'.

Now it is obvious that faith has both down-to-earth practical as well as religious applications. Marcel uses the homely example of granting someone credit; we believe in that person - perhaps even in contradiction to a past financial mistake. Faith in God, of course, exacts a higher standard, but the principle is the same: we make ourselves available to whatever evidence or knowledge God chooses to bestow. To acquire faith we must prepare ourselves spiritually. As Abdu'l-Bahá says, "If thou wishest the divine knowledge and recognition, purify thy heart from all beside God, be wholly attracted to the ideal, beloved One search for and choose Him . . ." (BWF, 383) and Bahá'u'lláh's "first counsel" (The Hidden Words, from the Arabic, 3) is to "possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart" (ibid.). However, in the Writings, faith and knowledge are not opposed; after telling us to "search for and choose Him" (BWF, 383), Abdu'l-Bahá says, apply thyself to rational and authoritative arguments. For arguments are a guide to the path and by this the heart will be turned unto the Sun of Truth" (ibid.). This next step leads to a higher level of faith: And when the heart is turned unto the Sun, then the eye will be opened and will recognize the Sun through the Sun itself. Then man will be in no need of arguments (or proofs), for the Sun is altogether independent, and absolute independence is in need of nothing, and proofs are one of the things of which absolute independence has no need. ^t^t^t(BWF, 383)

The opening eye is an apt symbol of making oneself available to what the sun, or, God has to bestow. A similar idea animates the following statement by Abdu'l-Bahá: "Once a soul becometh holy in all things, purified, sanctified, the gates of the knowledge of God will open wide before his eyes" (SWAB, 191).

It is, of course, clear that making oneself available is something we must choose to do. It is an existential act and those who refuse it, cut themselves off from whatever knowledge and understanding is attainable in that way.

Moreover, we should not think that only religious knowledge is dependent on faith, that is, an existential commitment to be open to what the data reveals. Even physics, the hardest of the 'hard sciences' requires such an open-ness and commitment. Indeed, at least some of the arguments among physicists themselves centre on what researchers are willing to accept even from the data themselves. At bottom, these arguments are about what procedures, devices, interpretations and theories can be trusted to reveal the true state of affairs. The various competing interpretations and theories of quantum mechanics are a case in point: because all of them explain the discovered phenomena, it is simply impossible to decide which of them represents the true state of affairs in the cosmos.

35) Kinds of Truth

If knowledge can be acquired by rational inquiry as well as by faith, it follows that the concept of truth in the Bahá'í Writings has at least two levels. The first, as we have already seen in our exploration of the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings, is the rational and empirical level. Here the Writings espouse a form of the correspondence theory of truth. (See "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings"). The second, existential
level concerns the issue of living 'in truth' insofar as we are what we appear to be and appear to be what we are both to others and ourselves. Sartre calls this living in good or "bad faith" (BN, 57), that is, in not lying, not to others or to oneself. Thus, to the extent that we lie neither to others nor ourselves, we live 'in truth'. We exhibit what Heidegger calls "authentic disclosedness" (BT, 264) to others and ourselves. In terms of the correspondence theory of truth, we are consciously and fully self-congruent.

However, the Writings suggest that there is yet a second level of existential
truth illustrated for example in Bahá'u'lláh's statement that ""He, Who is the
Eternal Truth, beareth Me witness!" (Gleanings, V, 9; also XXV, 60; XXXV, 82; LXIV, 122). Naturally, the question arises how God can be the truth. There are at least three possible answers. In the first place, we might say that God and the Manifestation are the truth because they are ultimately the standard by which all humanly discovered truths are to be assessed. Their very existence and their attributes are the standards by which truth is to be determined. Another, metaphysical answer follows logically from the unity of God, that is, the belief that God is absolutely one and "admits of no division" (SAQ, 113). As Abdu'l-Bahá writes, "the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence . ." (SAQ, 148). Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh says that "He, verily, is one and indivisible; one in His essence,
one in His attributes" (Gleanings, XCIII, 187; see also XCIV, 193). Since truth is one of God's attributes (Paris Talks, 60), we cannot escape the conclusion that God is truth. It is virtually self-evident that God

could not possess absolute unity if essence and attribute were distinct and divided. Such a division would reduce God to the level of His creations in which the essence made up of potentials and the attributes made up of actualized attributes are different. For reasons of logic alone, God must be truth.

A third way in which God is the truth may be developed on the basis of Heidegger's philosophy. According to Heidegger, "[a]ssertion is not the primary 'locus' of truth" (BT, 269). In other words, truth is not simply a matter of statements that correspond to reality; such statements possess a strictly secondary or "derivative character" (BT, 266). Rather, "in the most primordial sense" (ibid.), truth is the "disclosedness" (ibid.) that allows us to proceed to make judgments about correctness or falsity: "The most primordial 'truth' . . . is the ontological condition for the possibility that assertions can either be true or false - that they may uncover or cover things up" (ibid.). Thus, "primordial truth" is the pre-condition for all subsequent judgments. As the Prime Mover, the ground of being, the "object of desire" of the entire universe, God is that ontological pre-condition necessary for things to be true or false and indeed, in that sense, S/he is the Truth of truth. Without this pre-condition of truth, there could be no perception or understanding of the secondary truths. As such a pre-condition for all judgments about truth, God may be compared to light which is not seen in itself but is the necessary pre-condition for seeing. Another way of saying all this is to point out that God is the "disclosedness" (BT, 269) of things, that is, the condition of "uncoveredness" (BT, 267) or being uncovered by which the secondary or derivative truths can be known.

If God is truth in the Heideggerian sense, then it follows that God is always available in our quest for knowledge. He is, as Bahá'u'lláh writes, "closer to man than his life vein (Gleanings, XCIII, 185). God is, quite literally, the universal pre-condition for all knowledge and discrimination and, in that sense, revelation is occurring at all times and places. As Bahá'u'lláh writes,

"Likewise hath the eternal King spoken: "No thing have I perceived, except that I perceived God within it, God before it, or God after it" (Gleanings, XC, 178). God is simply unavoidable for those who have "eyes to see" (Deuteronomy, 29:4).

36) Conclusion

By exploring the concept of potentials, we have seen how a recognizably existential philosophy is embedded in the Bahá'í Writings, and how this existentialism bears close affinities to the work of Martin Heidegger in Being and Time and to the work of Gabriel Marcel. Although there are some similarities with Sartre's Being and Nothingness, these

similarities are relatively few and must remain superficial due to Sartre's insistent atheism and the fact that his central philosophy of negation and consciousness simply has no counterparts in the Bahá'í Writings. In other words, a Bahá'í existentialism may have 'Sartrean elements' but these will never be more than occasional overlaps. Sartre's late efforts to combine existentialism with Marxist materialism puts an even greater rift between his philosophy and the Bahá'í Writings. Furthermore, while a Bahá'í existentialism may have several areas of agreement with Kierkegaard, the fact remains that the Danish philosopher's tone, his anti-rationalism as well as vehement opposition to grand narratives keeps the two philosophies widely apart. This is especially obvious once we realize just how closely tied a Bahá'í existentialism is to the philosophy of Aristotle. Given this Aristotelian aspect of the Bahá'í Writings and the existential philosophy embedded in them, the affinities to Heidegger and Marcel are no surprise insofar as both of these philosophers were heavily influenced by their in-depth study of classical Greek philosophy. Like a Bahá'í existentialism, their philosophies are not limited by Aristotle's world-view, but rather build on it as a foundation on which to erect a wholly new kind of building.

We shall end this introduction to a Bahá'í existentialism not with an abstract summary but rather with an image that summarizes much of what we have discovered: we Bahá'ís are not pilgrims headed for a final destination be it Paradise, or Nirvana or Valhalla, but rather, we are all mariners and our lives are a journey that never ends. Days and nights, in different weathers, on different seas and through changing climates we sail ever onward discovering new lands and our prows are aimed at the horizon and the Great Attractor whose brightness draws us forever onward. Each moment is an arrival and departure; a "Land-ho!" and "Anchors aweigh!"; a parting sigh and a welcoming smile, a discovery and a recognition, a being-toward-death and a being-toward-birth, a self-transcendence and a self-disappointment, a "Ready-aye-ready" and a "Not-yet", a moment of knowledge and a moment of mystery, a falling into the troughs and a rising onto the crests. Like all mariners, we are 'in-between'. We live between waves and winds, between sea and sky, between being ourselves and never being ourselves, between anticipation and anxiety, between here and not-here, between peace with ourselves and internal conflict, between being true and being untruth. Yet, through this all, we try as best we can to see the light of the Great Attractor and to guide our ships by that light.

Abbreviations

BN
Being

and Nothingness

BT
Being
and Time

BWF
Bahá'í
World Faith

FWU

Foundations
of World Unity

MB
The
Mystery of Being

PE

The
Philosophy of Existentialism

PB
Proclamation
of Bahá'u'lláh

PUP

Promulgation
of Universal Peace

SAQ
Some
Answered Questions

SDC

Secret
of Divine Civilization

SWAB

Selected
Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá

TB
Tablets
of Bahá'u'lláh

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