

What 'Abdu'l-Bahá is against is the idea that one species could gradually and haphazardly transform into another species on its own, so he says: "Supposing this to be true [this gradual change in appearance], it is still not proof of the change of the species. No...it is merely like the change and alteration of the embryo of man until it reaches the degree of reason and perfection" (SAQ, Chap. 49, 193). This analogy does not imply that "there was a time when man walked on his hands and feet, or had a tail" etc., because 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "This explanation is assuming assent to the [Darwinistic] evolution of species, but the truth is that man was, from the beginning, in this perfect form and composition, and possessed the capacity and aptitude for acquiring inner and outer perfections, and was the manifestation of these words, 'We will make man in Our image and likeness'" (Mufávadát 138, SAQ, Chap. 49, 194; revised translation). Consequently, wherever 'Abdu'l-Bahá compares the evolution of man on this planet to a human being's embryological development (e.g. SAQ, chaps. 47 and 51), he does not seem to be saying that man once had a form and composition similar to other animal species.

Although man is man only by reason of his intellectual endowment, this capacity requires a particular kind of biological composition: man appears on earth (or elsewhere) only when this kind of composition is present. This is the theme of the second proof offered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in SAQ, Chapter 46: "The perfection of each individual being...is due to the composition of the elements, to their measure, to their balance, to the manner of their combination, and to the interaction and influence of other beings. In the case of man, when all these factors are gathered together [in a particular way], then man exists." So a form such as a fish or a dog is not and never was man. In SAQ, Chapter 51, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "In the beginning of his formation [in the matrix of the world] mind and spirit also existed," this required an appropriate biological form.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, therefore, teaches the appearance of species on this planet by the "formation" or "composition" of already-existing elements into particular configurations. When the species appear, they appear physically complete (just as the embryo of a child is physically complete), though their potential perfections become manifested gradually.

The cause of formation is not via God directly, but via species essences (a subject treated in detail in my forthcoming article). 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, for example: "Each time that the isolated elements become combined in accordance with the divine universal system, one being among beings comes into the world. That is to say, that when certain elements are combined, a vegetable existence is produced; when others are combined, it is an animal; again others become combined, and different creatures attain existence. In each case, the existence of things is the consequence of their realities" (Mufávadát 204, SAQ, chap. 82, p. 292; revised translation). Realities (haqá'iq) is a synonym for essences (mahiyát). The realities of living beings are one category of

Platonic forms or laws of nature.

'Abdu'l-Bahá does not explicitly explain how creation by formation occurs, though he does say that the species essences become manifested as soon as capacity exists to receive them: "The divine emanations [essences] pervading all created beings have had no beginning and will have no end. That illimitable bounty becomes effective in every station whenever the capacity appears to receive it" (Khitábát 2: 106; The Promulgation of Universal Peace: 160, revised translation). Species essences, therefore, have no beginning or end; they are part of God's timeless creation; and they manifest themselves where the capacity to receive them and the right mutual influence of other beings (environment) exists. The important point is that for 'Abdu'l-Bahá species are timeless realities, or essences, while the compositions dependent upon them are mutable and subject to appearance and extinction, progress and decline.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings on this subject are not original but are based on the Judeo-Christian-Islamic doctrine that the formation of all things is by God's creative power, and they are firmly based in Platonic essentialistic metaphysics, insofar as Platonism was received and understood by Muslim philosophers. In one of his talks on the subject of evolution, given in San Francisco on 10 October 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá associates his views with the "philosophers of the East," among whom he includes "Aristotle and Plato, and the philosophers of Iran" (Khitábát 2: 299; PUP 356, revised translation). Many of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's intellectual contemporaries in the Arab world, such as Jamál al-Din al-Afghani, Hussein al-Jisr, and Abu al-Majd Muhammad Rida al-Isfahaní shared 'Abdu'l-Bahá's response to Darwinism. Isfahaní, for example, states: "What is meant by the philosophy of creation is the theory of the independence of species (istiqlál al-anwá') and their non-evolution from each other. If we have defended this philosophy, it is a purely scientific defence, not religious" (Naqd falsafa Darwin, 1:179). Like 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a definition of evolution that he finds acceptable is "the movement of living bodies toward [their own] perfection" (221), a perfection that is potentially present from the beginning as part of God's timeless creation. The philosophical and historical context of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's response to Darwinism is fully treated in my forthcoming article Evolution and Bahá'í Belief (article), in Evolution and Bahá'í Belief (book).

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