

Towards an Understanding of that Scholarship in the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha which is a Dynamic System

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In order to understand scholarship as found in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha, one must first remember that the annunciators of the Baha'i teachings did not merely reveal a set of new principles or laws but introduced a new process of thinking and a new approach to phenomena, hitherto not found among the classical or even post-enlightenment thinkers. That recent developments in 'chaos' and non-linear systems theory (Pergine, Feigenbaum, Lazlo, et al), only in the last decades, are moving science closer to the Baha'i approach is a fascinating subject (though no surprise to the Baha'is who believe the teachings to be Divine in their origins). Alas the subject is beyond the scope of this paper.

The following pages <1> will examine the major claimants to scholarship, which 'Abdu'l-Baha identified, and will show that none of them, independently, can be regarded as a sufficient condition for scholarship. Each is merely a necessary condition with its own strengths and limitations. In the mind of 'Abdu'l-Baha, these conditions are dynamically interrelated. The weakness in one is compensated by the strength of another to form that set of interrelationships which *in toto* becomes (in the jargon of modern systems theory) that dynamic, evolutionary, super-complex, open intellectual system we know as scholarship.

Hitherto, most scientists and model builders, both in the natural sciences as well as the social sciences, have preoccupied themselves with such phenomena that have fit their deterministic (i.e. showing a linear cause and effect relationship), mechanistic (i.e., constructed from an n-number of elemental components or causes) and static equilibrium (i.e., the resultant effect having gone through any transitional stages and showing no further automatic tendencies towards change or transformation) assumptions.

Whilst this approach has served well for understanding such static and inert phenomena (such as architectural and/or engineering constructions, simple social organizations, linear mathematical functions, zero-sum games, or models thereof) few would, today, disagree (even if they could not posit any desirable alternatives) that this approach has proved inadequate in helping us understand the dynamic, evolutionary, and complex interrelated phenomena with which the world we live in abounds. The attempt to reduce the dynamic world to a methodologically convenient linear or static model by a series of further debilitating and simplifying assumptions has led even further away from the real world, focusing more argument upon methodology and process than upon any visionary diagnosis or didactic lessons with which the world can be (or has been) transformed.

In no field has this been more true than in our attempts to understand scholarship, itself. Like Kipling's seven blind men—who each thought the anatomical part of the elephant he had grasped was, in fact, the Elephant—the gnostic beneficiaries of knowledge, the empiricists, the scientists, and the modern academics have each claimed for themselves the exclusive title of scholarship. <2=PoFUP p.20> Blinded by mechanistic and static assumptions, at times, by haughtiness, and/or prejudice, each perceived its approach to be the ONLY one

worthy of true scholarship. Even when recognizing the merit of another's approach, it was perforce, where their perceptions or methods overlapped, rather than as acceptable alternatives or the dynamic interrelatedness which would have been obvious to any one of them who could (or was prepared to) SEE the whole 'Elephant' by standing back from it.

To the empiricists, for example, the surest foundation of scholarship lies in the precise and accurate measurement of observed phenomena. The tools and the methodology of the empiricists provide a convention for studying and investigating the perceived world and set a bench-mark for comparison and testing of hypothesis. No one would deny that these strengths are an integral part and parcel of scholarship. But besides the obvious limitations and even illusionary misconceptions of the human senses, the empiricist approach is uni-directional in its logic. A tree can be observed and tabulated as a perceived truth. But so long as the forest was beyond the measuring capabilities of the observer, its existence could not be tallied as a truth. These weaknesses and limitations have precluded this approach from being recognized independently as scholarship.

Whilst sharing with the empiricists the same dedication to observation, the rationalists' logic is multi-directional. It is strong where the empiricists' approach is the weakest. If deducing the truth of a phenomena from observations is one direction, then to induce the existence of objects or phenomena from an integration of their known components, ingredients, or causal elements is more than just another direction since it allows dissimilar objects or even those that cannot be physically measured to be tabulated as truths. Whilst for the empiricists, standing in the middle of a cluster of trees, they are only trees, rationalists can by a process of induction see the forest as a separate truth—notwithstanding the fact that the forest has no other measurable physical features other than that of trees or may be too large to begin to measure. Inductive reasoning also allows the integration of observable-realities to build models of other realities. As the means of testing new models—by progressively more advanced methods of experimentation, and the more recent developments in computer simulation—improves (and will continue to do so in the future), inductive model building will win itself a larger role in the field of scholarship. But so long as the number of relevant variables that can be processed by the models are limited; so long as those significant variables (such as those which explain human behaviour) cannot be measured or incorporated into the models, the rationalist approach cannot possibly be recognized independently as scholarship. It can only be cherished as an element of it.

Few scholars would deny that science is the surest, the most rigorous, the most logically consistent, and demonstrable expression of man's rational faculties. 'Abdu'l-Baha went even further in His praise and approbation. Science is "... the first emanation from God toward Man." <3=PoFJP p.49> Science is a divine order wherein "... for everything ... God has created a sign and symbol, and established standards and tests by which it may be known." <4=SoFDC p.33> "God has created or deposited this love of reality in man. A scientific man ... through processes of inductive reasoning and research ... studies the human body politic, understands social problems and weaves the web and texture of civilization." <5=PoFJP p.49-50> At Columbia University, in April 1912, 'Abdu'l-Baha explained that science "... is peculiar to man alone ..." and constitutes his "... most noble and praiseworthy accomplishment ..." <6=PoFJP p.29> "Science", He continued, "is the discoverer of the past. From its premises of past and present we deduce conclusions as to the future." <7=loc.cit> Perhaps the best and most reliable of the many approaches, the rationalist approach is still only a part of scholarship and cannot be

scholarship itself. The conclusions of science, *ceteris paribus*, however conclusive or convincing, leave unanswered (for example) the question whether any particular future is desirable or worthy of pursuit. Whilst it may be argued that this question is beyond the scope or competence of science, surely it cannot be admitted to being beyond the scope of scholarship—not if scholarship seeks to expand the horizons of knowledge and human civilization. In the words of Baha’u’llah:

The learned of the day must direct the people to acquire those branches of knowledge which are of use, that both the learned themselves and the generality of mankind may derive benefits therefrom. Such academic pursuits as begin and end in words alone have never been and will never be of any worth. <8=10fB p. 169>

If the question of ‘what is worthy of pursuit’ has been seen as beyond the scope of science, it has always been the prerogative of those gnostic claimants who professed to an innate or, at the least, an inspired knowledge of the truth. The oldest claimant to scholarship, it has hitherto been seen as the most antithetical to the scientific methods. Plato’s well known analogy of the cave—wherein an incarcerated and lethered mankind (symbolic of his earthliness) recognizes THE TRUTH only from the innate memory of the FORMS whose shadows are reflected (from another realm) on the walls of the cave—is a good illustration of the gnostic claim. Reason and the scientific method are powerful and effective tools, but they are limited by their vantage point. They are inside the cave. They are a measurement (however accurate) of the perceived truth rather than THE TRUTH—a mere measurement of the shadows. If perceived truths are a measurement of ‘what is’, the ideal FORMS represent ‘what ought to be’. Where scientific precision and accuracy are the weakest, the gnostic claims hold forth strongest. But at a risk. The gnostic claimant cannot proffer any demonstrable proof beyond his own credibility. This obvious and fatal weakness, opens the Pandora’s box to any number of self-interested and suspect professors of the truth. At its worst extreme, it degenerates into the bedlam of opinions, whimsical dreams, and illusions of grandeur. On the other hand, whilst albeit rare, amongst these claimants one can sometimes find the voice of Revelation, educating man, and opening his eyes to truths that are not susceptible to any scientific tools of measurement or logic. What distinguishes the rare but Divine from the common but untrustworthy is the authority and credibility of the claimant. According to Jesus <9=Mat 7:16> it was by their fruits—i.e., results—that these claimants should be judged. Baha’u’llah, Himself, writes :

Know verily that [the claim to] knowledge is of two kinds: Divine and Satanic. The one welteeth out from the fountain of Divine inspiration; the other is but a reflection of vain and obscure thoughts. The source of the former is God Himself, the motive-force of the latter the whisperings of selfish desire The former bringeth forth the fruits of patience, of longing desire, of true understanding, and love; whilst the latter can yield naught but arrogance, vainglory and conceit. <10=Iqan p.69>

It is precisely because man has throughout his past been able to put his trust in Beings such as Jesus, Buddha, and/or Baha’u’llah and benefit from Their visions and educating principles, that an understanding of scholarship cannot ignore or rule out the gnostic contribution to scholarship. We must only fortify our vigilance and scrutinize the motives and character of such claimants in order to sift those rare and precious few whose authority and reliability are credible from the numerous charlatans.

For the lack of a better appellation, we shall call the fourth claim to scholarship the academic claimant. Instead of discovery or gnostic access to the truth, the academic approach to scholarship dwells upon the re-exposition, criticism, and interpretation of accumulated knowledge. Whilst no one would argue that it is possible to pursue a scholarly work without reference to its antecedent, accumulated body of oral tradition and/or academic literature, what is not so obvious is how easy it is (as we have in the early 20th century) to mistake such work for scholarship itself. Too often universities and academic institutions (whether real or devoted solely to publications) compromise on original thought and the expansion of human horizons, which are the basic heart-beats of scholarship, in pragmatic pursuit of the marginal step forward from a mere re-exposition, re-arrangement, re-interpretation and critical re-view of the past. This is not to say that such work is wrong or even futile. Quite the contrary. Extreme examples notwithstanding, it is a part of scholarship. But once again it cannot be scholarship. Academic claimants are students of scholarship. Not all of them need necessarily be (or succeed in becoming) scholars. In a unique treatise devoted specifically to the economic and social development of civilizations, 'Abdu'l-Baha challenged scholars:

It is, therefore, urgent that beneficial articles and books be written, clearly and definitely establishing what the present-day requirements of the people are, and what will conduce to the happiness and advancement of society." <11=SoIDC p.109>

and (proudly for those of us in Japan) held up the case of Japan—a hundred years before its full flowering—as an example:

... now for some years, Japan has opened its eyes and adopted the techniques of contemporary progress and civilization, promoting sciences and industries of use to the public, and striving to the utmost of their power and competence until public opinion was focused on reform. ... Observe carefully how education and the arts of civilization bring honour, prosperity, independence and freedom to a government and its people. <12=SoIDC p. 111>

It may not be so obvious to a non-Japanese audience that the early pioneers of Japanese social and economic development, such as Yukichi Fukuzawa, were not academics. Japanese academia, at the time, was still steeped in its classical traditions. It was such independent thinkers, courageous enough to step out from their tradition-laden-world and to apply their new-found Western ideas and technology to the development and advancement of their society, who were true scholars. Their research into Western thought and literature made them students of scholarship whilst their application of these ideas to what they saw as society's needs made these pioneers scholars. What their militaristic successors did with the fruits of their work, however despicable, does not diminish—as can be seen today—the worthwhile foundations they laid down.

The preceding pages have outlined the four claimants to scholarship identified in the writings and talks of 'Abdu'l-Baha. The discussion has put forth their claims in such a way as to show how examples of their respective weaknesses, which obviate any exclusive claims to scholarship, are, in fact, off-set by the strengths of one or another claimant, suggesting that they are all part of a larger set of contributing elements to scholarship. The scholarship which 'Abdu'l-Baha talks about can now be understood (in the jargon of modern systems theory) as

an open, complex, evolving intellectual system consisting of different elements which hitherto may have been easily mistaken for scholarship itself. Using Kipling's analogy, whilst none of the different anatomical parts, held by the blind men, were in themselves the Elephant, these parts can now be seen as a synergistic totality—which brings the the animal to life.

The empiricists' fine tools of observation, the rationalists' logical deductions and inductions and the academics' bank of accumulated knowledge have been passed from one generation to another as science. But the discoveries of science and the models constructed for their study, however rigorously obtained and rightly acclaimed as truthful, do not exist in a value-free vacuum. Scholarship must not only address itself to the positive scientific question of 'what is', but must needs also ask the normative question, is it 'what it ought to be?' That science cannot provide an answer to the latter does not necessarily mean there are no answers. The gnostic method which is weakest in rigour and proof, is, in fact, man's best answer to this normative question.

In the mind of 'Abdu'l-Baha, scholarship combined all four approaches and addressed itself to both the positive as well as normative questions. In 'Abdu'l-Baha's own words :

Briefly, the point is that in the human material world of phenomena these four are the only existing criteria or avenues of knowledge, and all of them are faulty and unreliable. What then remains? How shall we attain the reality of knowledge? <13=PoFuP p.22>

[Each] of them are liable to mistake and error in conclusions. But a statement presented to the mind accompanied by proofs which the senses can perceive to be correct, which the faculty of reason can accept, which is in accord with traditional authority and sanctioned by the promptings of the heart, can be adjudged and relied upon as perfectly correct, for it has been proved and tested by all the standards of judgement and found to be complete. When we apply but one test, there are possibilities of mistake. <14=PoFuP p.25>

Before ending this discussion of the dynamic nature of scholarship (i.e. the interrelatedness of its elements), a few words might be in order to invite further discussion, research, and papers on the implications of looking at scholarship as a dynamic, super-complex, evolutionary, open intellectual system. The dynamic issue has been the subject of this paper.

Looking at scholarship as a super-complex system will focus upon the relative weighted significance of any one or more of the four elements. Attempts to understand which of these elements play the most significant role in scholarship—not just in a historical sense but also in a theoretical one—is an intriguing question which will advance our discussion further.

Each scholar approaches his subject from a particular cultural context. As an open system, scholarship, by definition, cannot be bound by any cultural, religious, ethnic, or (for that matter) any other rigid boundaries. That this is in conformity with the ideals of Baha'i scholarship goes without saying. Yet, further investigation and elucidation will no doubt be a valuable contribution to our understanding of scholarship.

As an evolutionary system, these boundaries of scholarship are subject to continuous change and fluctuation. This should evoke a deep sense of humility in the heart of the true scholar. Further discussions about scholarship and the nature of man (i.e. the scholar) is also a valuable subject which is open to further analysis and discussion.

In conclusion, I can but hope that this humble paper will have challenged, stimulated, and opened the discussion.

Citations & Footnotes

1. I am grateful to Mrs. Jane Goldstone for pointing out my carelessness, but any remaining errors are, of course, mine alone.
2. PoFUP 'Abdu'l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace. Talks 3. Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Baha during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912. 6. & 7. Compiled by Howard MacNutt. Wilmette, 13 & 14. Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Trust. 1982.
4. SoFDC 'Abdu'l-Baha, The Secret of Divine Civilization. Wilmette, 11 & 12. Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Trust. 1957.
8. ToFB The Universal House of Justice, Research Department. Tablets of Baha'u'llah. Revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas. Haifa: Baha'i World Centre. 1978.
9. Matt St. Matthew. The Gospel. The King James Version. The Holy Bible. Containing the Old and New Testaments. New York: American Bible Society.
10. Iqan Baha'u'llah. The Kitab-i-Iqan. The Book of Certitude. Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Trust. 1950.