Commentary/Commentaire/Comentário

AUTHOR’S RESPONSE TO COMMENTARY ON
“ON HUMAN ORIGINS: A BAHÁ’Í PERSPECTIVE”
Commentator: Arash Abizadeh

It is not surprising that there should be some controversy engendered by my attempt to deal with a topic as difficult as evolution with all its attendant complicating issues. There are of course several points where Arash Abizadeh makes a contribution to our difficult attempt, at this early stage in Bahá’í scholarship, to make progress on these issues. However, certain other points I made need clarification.

The issue of chance seems to be a central cause of difficulty in the interpretation of my article. Let me return to the extended quotation from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (Bahá’í World Faith 342) on the first page of Abizadeh’s commentary. Abizadeh believes that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá here is rejecting chance as having existence in the world. But on this basis ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would also then be rejecting necessary properties, of which he gives explicit examples that have real existence (e.g., light that is the essential property of the sun). I believe that what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is discussing here is the existence of beings, in other words the cause for the coming into existence of matter and living creatures. He concludes that “an unseen force described as the Ancient Power, causeth these elements to come together, every formation giving rise to a distinct being” (Bahá’í World Faith 342). This recognition of a First Cause and a power that animates beings is not the same as saying that chance (accident) does not exist. The three categories of accidental, necessary, and voluntary causation date back to the ancient Greeks, with whom ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was quite familiar and to whom he often referred. I therefore assumed that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was making reference to this scheme of viewing causation and endorsing it.

Examples of these three types of causes are helpful. A necessary property is one which is fundamentally a part of that thing: “... the inherent property of a thing can in no wise be dissociated from it ...” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Bahá’í World Faith 342). A very clear example of such a property is gravity. Any object with mass will attract other objects to it according to a fixed relationship. It is not possible to separate gravity from an object and have an object without gravity. Accidental relationships or properties or events in our modern terminology are not without cause but are unpredictable. Examples include throwing a die, the exact spot that a leaf falling from a tree will land, where lightning will strike, etc. These things have causes, but the causes are so complicated and unobservable that we say that they are random or stochastic. This is what I mean by a chance event. Voluntary causes are those attributable to free agents able to exercise their will, such as human beings.

The second extended quotation from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (Bahá’í World Faith 343) does not bear on whether accidental events happen in the world but rather traces back the chain of causation to infer an Ultimate Cause. I fully accept ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s account of this Ultimate Cause and find no conflict here.
Bahá’u’lláh gives an explanation of fate and chance in the following:

Know thou, O fruit of My Tree, that the decrees of the Sovereign Ordainer, as related to fate and predestination, are of two kinds. Both are to be obeyed and accepted. The one is irrevocable, the other is, as termed by men, impending. To the former all must unreservedly submit, inasmuch as it is fixed and settled. God, however, is able to alter or repeal it. As the harm that must result from such a change will be greater than if the decree had remained unaltered, all, therefore, should willingly acquiesce in what God hath willed and confidently abide by the same.

The decree that is impending, however, is such that prayer and entreaty can succeed in averting it. (Gleanings 133)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá elaborates upon this topic:

Fate is of two kinds: one is decreed, and the other is conditional or impending. The decreed fate is that which cannot change or be altered, and conditional fate is that which may occur. So, for this lamp, the decreed fate is that the oil burns and will be consumed; therefore, its eventual extinction is a decree which it is impossible to alter or to change because it is a decreed fate. In the same way, in the body of man a power of life has been created, and as soon as it is destroyed and ended, the body will certainly be decomposed, so when the oil in this lamp is burnt and finished, the lamp will undoubtedly become extinguished.

But conditional fate may be likened to this: while there is still oil, a violent wind blows on the lamp, which extinguishes it. This is a conditional fate. It is wise to avoid it, to protect oneself from it, to be cautious and circumspect. (Some Answered Questions 244)

Finally, Bahá’u’lláh makes a very interesting statement that seems to indicate even the prophets are somewhat subject to chance events:

Other Prophets, similarly, have been subject to poverty and afflictions, to hunger, and to the ills and chances of this world. As these holy Persons were subject to such needs and wants, the people were, consequently, lost in the wilds of misgivings and doubts, and were afflicted with bewilderment and perplexity. How, they wondered, could such a person be sent down from God, assert His ascendancy over all the peoples and kindreds of the earth, and claim Himself to be the goal of all creation,—even as He hath said: “But for Thee, I would not have created all that are in heaven and on earth,”—and yet be subject to such trivial things? (Kitáb-i-Íqán 72–73)

Yet somehow, in spite of these chance events and tribulations, the Will of God in the end triumphs, and His Cause is victorious. This is one of the great mysteries of God. Thus, there is substantial support in the writings for the existence of chance.

Next Abizadeh addresses how the divine Will might act in or upon the world. This topic is a complete mystery to me. I do, of course, agree with him that God is not bound by space or time. My reference to God as a “periodic intervenor” in our evolution was in reference to our chronological time, not to God’s sense of time. Abizadeh’s analysis of this problem of how God might
affect events in the world is more thorough than I was able to achieve; unfortunately, it is not going to be satisfactory to scientists. If we say that the wind and the rain and the laws of nature (including evolution) are manifestations of the divine Will or its “expression,” this does not resolve the difficulties presented by evolution, because the fact that we are here at all appears to be no more than a toss of the dice based on the laws of nature. It does not appear necessary (as gravity is a necessary property) but appears accidental to the scientist. If it is accidental, then God’s purpose in creation (for humanity to know God) would not necessarily have been fulfilled. Thus, I turned to the voluntary cause, the divine Will, and postulated its involvement. Note that I merely postulated this because the concept of how this might have worked is really beyond our present understanding and is without any direct objective evidence in any case.

Abizadeh rejects my attempt to resolve the points made by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as being consistent with the scientific account of evolution. I first pointed out that the Bahá’í writings support the scientific account of cosmology. By this, I meant the general scientific account as opposed to the literal interpretation of scripture. I supported this point with several quotations from Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in which they reject literal interpretation of the creation story. As for evolution, I believe that when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “This theory . . . is an evident error” (Questions 177), he is rejecting a purely material cause for human existence because he then goes on to acknowledge that human beings have changed in form over time. I do not pretend that my attempt to resolve these difficulties is the final word on this subject, but there are certain hard scientific facts that we must face, and our biological descent from animals is one of these. We share 99% of our genes with chimpanzees and can trace shared features such as our bone structure, blood chemistry, DNA structure, etc. with other living things in proportion to how closely related we are to them based on descent from common ancestors. While the details of this scientific account are relative, the vast preponderance of detail in this regard is not something that we can merely call “science is relative” and ignore. I believe that it is possible to view evolution as part of the divine Will and that, to a God to Whom the past is the same as the present, it is possible for humans to be simultaneously preexistent and gradually evolving, uniquely ordained from our inception and yet arising from primitive forms that change over time.

I think that the last paragraph of Abizadeh’s paper actually helps us get closer to understanding these mysteries and apparent contradictions, but it is also clear that we have a long way to go. We may never understand all of these things because the operation of the divine Will is inherently largely incomprehensible to our limited minds.

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