

Revelation and Reason, III

الوحي والعقل

Abstract

A Baha'i exploration of the doctrines of **Revelation** (الوحي) and **Reason** (العقل) will proceed in an undetermined number of installments, with the third installment pointing out the two kinds of revealed verses and the two kinds of reason.

There are two kinds of revealed verses according to Qur'an (3:7):

He it is Who hath revealed unto thee (Muhammad) the Scripture wherein are clear **مُحْكَمَاتٌ** revelations – they are the substance of the Book – and others (which are) allegorical **مُتَشَبِهَاتٌ**. But those in whose hearts is doubt pursue, forsooth, that which is allegorical seeking (to cause) dissension by seeking to explain it. None knoweth its explanation save Allah, and those who are of sound instruction. Say: We believe therein; the whole is from our Lord; but only men of understanding really heed.

(Pickthall's translation with a couple of modifications to his English)

In 1862, Baha'u'llah wrote Kitab-i-Iqan, answering questions asked of Him by Haji Mirza Siyyid Muhammad, one of the uncles of Haji Siyyid 'Ali Muhammad (called the Bab), and it ends with this seminal statement on the same theme:

It is evident unto thee that the Birds of Heaven and Doves of Eternity speak a twofold language.

He cites first the "outward language" that does not require worldly learning or divine interpretation to be understood by anyone with a pure heart and a chaste soul (see below):

One language, the outward language, is devoid of allusions, is unconcealed and unveiled; that it may be a guiding lamp and a beaconing light whereby wayfarers may attain the heights of holiness, and seekers may advance into the realm of eternal reunion. Such are the unveiled traditions and the evident verses already mentioned.

He continues with a depiction of the second “concealed language”:

The other language is veiled and concealed, so that whatever lieth hidden in the heart of the malevolent may be made manifest and their innermost being be disclosed. Thus hath Şádiq, son of Muḥammad, spoken: “God verily will test them and sift them.” This is the divine standard, this is the Touchstone of God, wherewith He proveth His servants. None apprehendeth the meaning of these utterances except them whose hearts are assured, whose souls have found favor with God, and whose minds are detached from all else but Him. In such utterances, the literal meaning, as generally understood by the people, is not what hath been intended. Thus it is recorded: “Every knowledge hath seventy meanings, of which one only is known amongst the people. And when the Qá’im shall arise, He shall reveal unto men all that which remaineth.” He also saith: “We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings; each one of these meanings we can explain.”

Baha’u’llah now explains why He has ended Kitab-i-Iqan with this statement:

These things We mention only that the people may not be dismayed because of certain traditions and utterances, which have not yet been literally fulfilled, that they may rather attribute their perplexity to their own lack of understanding, and not to the nonfulfillment of the promises in the traditions, inasmuch as the meaning intended by the Imáms of the Faith is not known by this people, as evidenced by the traditions themselves. The people, therefore, must not allow such utterances to deprive them of the divine bounties, but should rather seek enlightenment from them who are the recognized Expounders thereof, so that the hidden mysteries may be unraveled, and be made manifest unto them.

We perceive none, however, amongst the people of the earth who, sincerely yearning for the Truth, seeketh the guidance of the divine Manifestations concerning the abstruse matters of his Faith. All are dwellers in the land of oblivion, and all are followers of the people of wickedness and rebellion. God will verily do unto them that which they themselves are doing, and will forget them even as they have ignored His Presence in His day. Such is His decree unto those that have denied Him, and such will it be unto them that have rejected His signs.

'Abdu'l-Baha describes the two kinds of human knowledge that correspond to these two kinds of revealed verses, in "Some Answered Questions":

There is a point that is pivotal to grasping the essence of the other questions that we have discussed or will be discussing, namely, that human knowledge is of two kinds.

One is the knowledge acquired through the senses. That which the eye, the ear, or the senses of smell, taste, or touch can perceive is called "sensible". For example, the sun is sensible, as it can be seen. Likewise, sounds are sensible, as the ear can hear them; odours, as they can be inhaled and perceived by the sense of smell; foods, as the palate can perceive their sweetness, sourness, bitterness, or saltiness; heat and cold, as the sense of touch can perceive them. These are called sensible realities.

The other kind of human knowledge is that of intelligible things; that is, it consists of intelligible realities which have no outward form or place and which are not sensible. For example, the power of the mind is not sensible, nor are any of the human attributes: These are intelligible realities. Love, likewise, is an intelligible and not a sensible reality. For the ear does not hear these realities, the eye does not see them, the smell does not sense them, the taste does not detect them, the touch does not perceive them. Even the ether, the forces of which are said in natural philosophy to be heat, light, electricity, and magnetism, is an intelligible and not a sensible reality. Likewise, nature itself is an intelligible and not a sensible reality; the human spirit is an intelligible and not a sensible reality.

But when you undertake to express these intelligible realities, you have no recourse but to cast them in the mould of the sensible, for outwardly there is nothing beyond the sensible. Thus, when you wish to express the reality of the spirit and its conditions and degrees, you are obliged to describe them in terms of sensible things, since outwardly there exists nothing but the sensible. For example, grief and happiness are intelligible things, but when you wish to express these spiritual conditions you say, "My heart became heavy", or "My heart was uplifted", although one's heart is not literally made heavy or lifted up. Rather, it is a spiritual or intelligible condition, the expression of which requires the use of sensible terms. Another example is when you say, "So-and-so has greatly advanced", although he has remained in the same place, or "So-and-so has a high position", whereas, like everyone else, he continues to walk upon the earth. This elevation and advancement

are spiritual conditions and intelligible realities, but to express them you must use sensible terms, since outwardly there is nothing beyond the sensible.

To cite another example, knowledge is figuratively described as light, and ignorance as darkness. But reflect: Is knowledge sensible light or ignorance sensible darkness? Certainly not. These are only intelligible conditions, but when you wish to express them outwardly you call knowledge light and ignorance darkness and say, “My heart was dark and it became illumined.” Now, the light of knowledge and the darkness of ignorance are intelligible realities, not sensible ones, but when we seek to express them outwardly, we are obliged to give them a sensible form.

Thus it is evident that the dove which descended upon Christ was not a physical dove but a spiritual condition expressed, for the sake of comprehension, by a sensible figure. For example, in the Old Testament it is said that God appeared as a pillar of fire.⁷⁰ Now, that which is intended is not a sensible form but an intelligible reality that has been expressed in such a form.

Christ says, “The Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father.”⁷¹ Now, was Christ within God or was God within Christ? No, by God! This is an intelligible condition which has been expressed in a sensible figure.

We come to the explanation of the words of Bahá'u'lláh when He says: “O King! I was but a man like others, asleep upon My couch, when lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious were wafted over Me, and taught Me the knowledge of all that hath been. This thing is not from Me, but from One Who is Almighty and All-Knowing.”⁷² This is the station of divine revelation. It is not a sensible, but an intelligible reality. It is sanctified from and transcendent above past, present, and future. It is a comparison and an analogy—a metaphor and not a literal truth. It is not the condition that is commonly understood by the human mind when it is said that someone was asleep and then awoke, but signifies a passage from one state to another. For example, sleeping is the state of repose, and wakefulness is the state of motion. Sleeping is the state of silence, and wakefulness is the state of utterance. Sleeping is the state of concealment, and wakefulness is that of manifestation.

For example, in Persian and Arabic it is said that the earth was asleep, spring came, and it awoke; or that the earth was dead, spring came, and it found life again. These expressions are comparisons, analogies, similes, and figurative interpretations in the realm of inner meaning.

Briefly, the Manifestations of God have ever been and will ever be luminous Realities, and no change or alteration ever takes place in Their essence. At most, before Their revelation They are still and silent, like one who is asleep, and after Their revelation They are eloquent and effulgent, like one who is awake. (‘Abdu’l-Baha, “Some Answered Questions”, Part Two, Chapter 16)

As for the understanding of the “outward language” of divine revelation, Baha’u’llah writes:

Heed not the idle contention of those who maintain that the Book and verses thereof can never be a testimony unto the common people, inasmuch as they neither grasp their meaning nor appreciate their value. And yet, the unfailing testimony of God to both the East and the West is none other than the Qur’án. Were it beyond the comprehension of men, how could it have been declared as a universal testimony unto all people? If their contention be true, none would therefore be required, nor would it be necessary for them to know God, inasmuch as the knowledge of the divine Being transcendeth the knowledge of His Book, and the common people would not possess the capacity to comprehend it.

Such contention is utterly fallacious and inadmissible. It is actuated solely by arrogance and pride. Its motive is to lead the people astray from the Ridván of divine good-pleasure and to tighten the reins of their authority over the people. And yet, in the sight of God, these common people are infinitely superior and exalted above their religious leaders who have turned away from the one true God. **The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit.** This is evidenced by those who, today, though without a single letter of the accepted standards of learning, are occupying the loftiest seats of knowledge; and the garden of their hearts is adorned, through the showers of divine grace, with the roses of wisdom and the tulips of understanding. Well is it with the sincere in heart for their share of the light of a mighty Day! (Kitab-i-Iqan)

Corresponding to the two kinds of revealed verses, there are two kinds of reason, one human and the other divine. Baha’u’llah refers to the first kind of reason in Seven Valleys and The Tabernacle of Unity:

For some hold fast to reason and deny whatever reason comprehendeth not, and yet feeble minds can never grasp the reality of the stages that we have related...

(Valley of Wonderment, in Seven Valleys)

Another of his questions: “Some maintain that whatsoever is in accordance with the dictates of nature and of the intellect must needs be both permissible and compulsory in the divine law, and conversely that one should refrain from observing that which is incompatible with these standards. Others believe that whatsoever hath been enjoined by the divine law and its blessed Author should be accepted without rational proof or natural evidence and obeyed without question or reservation, such as the march between Safa and Marwah, the stoning of the pillar of Jamrah,¹³ the washing of one’s feet during ablutions, and so on. Kindly indicate which of these positions is acceptable.”

Intellect hath various degrees. As a discussion of the pronouncements made by the philosophers in this connection would pass beyond the scope of our discourse, we have refrained from mentioning them. It is nonetheless indisputably clear and evident that the minds of men have never been, nor shall they ever be, of equal capacity. How often hath it been observed that certain human minds, far from being a source of guidance, have become as fetters upon the feet of the wayfarers and prevented them from treading the straight Path! (From a Tablet to Mirza Abu’l-Fadl answering questions from Manikchi Sahib, a Zoroastrian (Parsee) enquirer about the teachings of Baha’u’llah, in “The Tabernacle of Divine Unity”)

‘Abdu’l-Baha refers to that limited human reason or intellect in a number of His Tablets and talks, including these:

Question: How far does human comprehension extend, and what are its limitations?

Answer: Know that comprehension varies. Its lowest degree consists in the senses of the animal realm, that is, the natural sensations which arise from the powers of the outward senses. This comprehension is common to man and animals, and indeed certain animals surpass man in this regard. In the human realm, however, comprehension differs and varies in accordance with the different degrees occupied by man.

The foremost degree of comprehension in the world of nature is that of the rational soul. This power and comprehension is shared in common by all men, whether they be heedless or aware, wayward or faithful. In the creation of God, the rational soul of man encompasses and is distinguished above all other created things: It is by virtue of its nobility and distinction that it encompasses them all. Through the power of the rational soul, man can discover the realities of things, comprehend their properties, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All the sciences, branches of learning, arts, inventions, institutions, undertakings, and discoveries have resulted from the comprehension of the rational soul. These were once impenetrable secrets, hidden mysteries, and unknown realities, and the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out of the invisible plane into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of comprehension in the world of nature, and the uttermost limit of its flight is to comprehend the realities, signs, and properties of contingent things. (“Some Answered Questions,” chapter 58)

It is clear that human realities differ one from another, that opinions and perceptions vary, and that this divergence of thoughts, opinions, understandings, and sentiments among individuals is an essential requirement. For differences of degree in creation are among the essential requirements of existence, which is resolved into countless forms. We stand therefore in need of a universal power which can prevail over the thoughts, opinions, and sentiments of all, which can annul these divisions and bring all souls under the sway of the principle of the oneness of humanity. (“Some Answered Questions,” chapter 84)

‘Abdu’l-Baha states that we cannot rely on human reason or intellect to answer all questions accurately:

All of these schools, by virtue of their reliance upon the balance of reason, have differed on all questions [al-masá’il] and their opinions are divided on all truths [al-Haqá’iq]. If the balance of reason is a just, accurate, and firm balance, then they should not differ in truths and questions, and the opinions of the former and latter generations should not diverge. Because of their conflict and their differences, therefore, it is established that the balance of reason is imperfect. Verily, if we were to conceive of a perfect balance and if thou wert to assess the weight of a hundred thousand souls with it, there would be no difference among them. Their lack of

consensus, however, is sufficient and irrefutable proof of the deficiency of the balance of reason. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Tablet on the Inmost Heart”, provisional translation by Steven Phelps and William McCants, March 2000; Persian text in "Min Makatib ‘Abdu’l-Bahá," pp. 83-86)

The scope of this knowledge is quite limited, as it is conditioned upon acquisition and attainment. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, "Mufavadat ‘Abdu’l-Bahá," p. 118; "Some Answered Questions," chapter 40)

But despite this, they diverged greatly in their opinions. They would even change their own views: For twenty years they would deduce the existence of something through rational arguments [be-dalá’il ‘aqliyyeh], and then afterwards they would disprove the same, again through rational arguments. Even Plato at first proved through rational arguments [be-dalá’il ‘aqliyyeh] the immobility of the earth and the movement of the sun, and then subsequently established, again through rational arguments [be-‘aqliyyeh], the centrality of the sun and the movement of the earth. Then the Ptolemaic theory became widespread, and Plato’s theory was entirely forgotten until a modern astronomer revived it. Thus have the mathematicians disagreed among themselves, even though they all relied on rational arguments [be-dalá’il ‘aqliyyeh].

Likewise, at one time they would establish a thing by rational arguments and disprove it at another, again by rational arguments. So a philosopher would firmly uphold a view for a time and adduce a range of proofs and arguments to support it [be-dalá’il ‘aqliyyeh], and afterwards he would change his mind and contradict his former position by rational arguments [be-dalíl ‘aqlí].

It is therefore evident that the criterion of reason is imperfect, as proven by the disagreements existing between the ancient philosophers as well as by their want of consistency and their propensity to change their own views. For if the criterion of intellect were perfect, all should have been united in their thoughts and agreed in their opinions. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, "Mufavadat ‘Abdu’l-Bahá," pp. 219-220; "Some Answered Questions," Chapter 83)

They observed the heavens and the motion of the chief planets, which they conceived to be caused by the movement of eight successive crystalline spheres enclosed within a ninth and outer one, which, by its action caused the others to move. But later

philosophers have said that these crystalline spheres are non-existent, and that the planets are suspended by the of gravitation, attraction, etc., thus utterly contradicting ancient theories. These ancient philosophers also said that as they could observe no movement or change in the heavens, they were therefore pre-existent and eternal. All these statements have been refuted. It is therefore evident that we cannot rely on this second method of obtaining knowledge, to ensure absolute accuracy. 'Successive philosophers are always contradicting each other, and propounding diverse theories. If absolute knowledge were to be obtained by this means, the wisest philosophers would agree in saying the same things. ('Abdu'l-Bahá to Miss Ethel Rosenberg, Rabb B7, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, original capitalizations and wording not found in published version [in brackets]; "Star of the West," VII:9, pp. 114-115)

As to the second criterion--reason--this likewise is unreliable and not to be depended upon. This human world is an ocean of varying opinions. If reason is the perfect standard and criterion of knowledge, why are opinions at variance and why do philosophers disagree so completely with each other? This is a clear proof that human reason is not to be relied upon as an infallible criterion. For instance, great discoveries and announcements of former centuries are continually upset and discarded by the wise men of today. Mathematicians, astronomers, chemical scientists continually disprove and reject the conclusions of the ancients; nothing is fixed, nothing final; everything is continually changing because human reason is progressing along new roads of investigation and arriving at new conclusions every day. In the future much that is announced and accepted as true now will be rejected and disproved. And so it will continue ad infinitum. ('Abdu'l-Bahá at Hotel Ansonia, New York, 17 April 1912, notes by Howard MacNutt; "The Promulgation of Universal Peace," p. 21)

But in the estimation of the people of insight this criterion is likewise defective and unreliable, for these same philosophers who held to reason or intellect as the standard of human judgment have differed widely among themselves upon every subject of investigation. The statements of the Greek philosophers are contradictory to the conclusions of the Persian sages. Even among the Greek philosophers themselves there is continual variance and lack of agreement upon any given subject. Great difference of thought also prevailed between the wise men of Greece and

Rome. Therefore, if the criterion of reason or intellect constituted a correct and infallible standard of judgment, those who tested and applied it should have arrived at the same conclusions. As they differ and are contradictory in conclusions, it is an evidence that the method and standard of test must have been faulty and insufficient. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá at Green Acre, Eliot, Maine, 16 August 1912, notes by Edna McKinney; "The Promulgation of Universal Peace," p. 254)

While they were thinking they became of different opinions. Discord and differences only show the measure of intellect to be untrue, for they all had the same intellect, and were this the true standard they would never have disagreed. Another reason which disproves this is that the philosopher first agreed that the atom could not be divided, but now it is believed that it can be divided. At first it was believed that the firmament was divided into spheres, and that all the stars moved together, but now it is believed that each has its own orbit. The proof of today is that the theory of the ancient philosophers was based on an incorrect foundation. One of the disproofs is that it was formerly believed that the sun revolved around the earth and caused day and night, but now it is believed that the earth revolves around the sun. Both have judged this by their intellect; consequently this proves the measure of intellect to be incorrect. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá to pilgrims, November 1900, notes of Miss Alma Albertson, National Bahá’í Archives, Wilmette, Illinois)

As to the measure of intellect, the old Greek and Persians judged everything by this measure and while they are thinking that this is the only way, they themselves begin to differ and disagree, and this fact only shows that the measure of intellect is not true, for they all have the same intellect, and were this the true standard they would have never disagreed. Another reason which disproves this is that the philosophers first agreed that the atoms could not be divided; now it is believed they can be divided. At first it was believed the firmament was divided into spheres, and is that it was formerly believed that the sun revolved around the earth to cause the day, but now that the earth revolves around the sun. While all the philosophers have intellect for their standard, the change of their opinions and basis proves that it is not the true one to go by. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá to pilgrims, 30 November 1900, notes of Corinne True, National Bahá’í Archives, Wilmette, Illinois)

To reiterate and summarize, 'Abdu'l-Bahá plainly states that reason, the special faculty of the rational soul or human spirit, is fallible, and leads to disagreement instead of unanimity:

Therefore it is evident that the method of reason is not perfect; for the differences of the ancient philosophers, the want of stability and the variations of their opinions, prove this. For if it were perfect, all ought to be united in their ideas and agreed in their opinions. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, "Mufavadat 'Abdu'l-Bahá," p. 220; "Some Answered Questions," Chapter 83)

If reason is the perfect standard and criterion of knowledge, why are opinions at variance and why do philosophers disagree so completely with each other? This is a clear proof that human reason is not to be relied upon as an infallible criterion. ('Abdu'l-Bahá at Hotel Ansonia, New York, 17 April 1912, notes by Howard MacNutt; "The Promulgation of Universal Peace," p. 21)

Therefore, if the criterion of reason or intellect constituted a correct and infallible standard of judgment, those who tested and applied it should have arrived at the same conclusions. As they differ and are contradictory in conclusions, it is evidence that the method and standard of the test must have been faulty and insufficient. ('Abdu'l-Bahá at Green Acre, Eliot, Maine, 16 August 1912, notes by Edna McKinney; "The Promulgation of Universal Peace," p. 254)

The proof of today is that the theory of the ancient philosophers was based on an incorrect foundation...consequently this proves the measure of intellect to be incorrect. ('Abdu'l-Bahá to pilgrims, 30 November 1900, notes of Miss Alma Albertson, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Illinois)

The proof of today is that the ancient philosophy was based on an incorrect foundation...While all the philosophers have intellect for their standard, the change of their opinions and basis proves that it is not the true one to go by. ('Abdu'l-Bahá to pilgrims, 30 November 1900, notes of Corinne True, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Illinois)

All these statements have been refuted. '[But] It is therefore [omitted in publication] evident that we cannot rely on this second method of obtaining knowledge, to ensure

absolute accuracy. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá to Miss Ethel Rosenberg, February–March 1901, Rabb B7, National Bahá’í Archives, Wilmette, Illinois)

The other kind of intellect or reason is that possessed by the Manifestations of God:

...the reality of the stages that we have related: The universal divine Intellect alone can comprehend them.

How can feeble reason embrace the Qur’án

Or the spider snare a phoenix in its web?

(Valley of Wonderment, citing poem by Sa’adi, in Seven Valleys)

The Perfect Intellect alone can provide true guidance and direction. Thus were these sublime words revealed by the Pen of the Most High, exalted be His glory, in response to this question: “The Tongue of Wisdom proclaimeth: He that hath Me not is bereft of all things. Turn ye away from all that is on earth and seek none else but Me. I am the Sun of Wisdom and the Ocean of Knowledge. I cheer the faint and revive the dead. I am the guiding Light that illumineth the way. I am the royal Falcon on the arm of the Almighty. I unfold the drooping wings of every broken bird and start it on its flight.”¹⁴

Consider how clearly the answer hath been revealed from the heaven of divine knowledge. Blessed are those who ponder it, who reflect upon it, and who apprehend its meaning! By the Intellect mentioned above is meant the universal divine Mind. (From the same Tablet to Mirza Abu’l-Fadl answering questions from Manikchi Sahib, a Zoroastrian (Parsee) enquirer about the teachings of Baha’u’llah, in “The Tabernacle of Divine Unity”)

‘Abdu’l-Baha referred to the universal divine mind and other attributes of the Manifestation of God in some of His Tablets and talks:

It is said in the blessed verse: **“He Who is the Dawning-place of God’s Cause hath no partner in the Most Great Infallibility. He it is Who, in the kingdom of creation, is the Manifestation of ‘He doeth whatsoever He willeth’. God hath reserved this distinction unto His own Self, and ordained for none a share in so sublime and transcendent a station.”¹²⁶**

Know that infallibility is of two kinds: infallibility in essence and infallibility as an attribute. The same holds true of all other names and attributes: For example, there is the knowledge of the essence of a thing and the knowledge of its attributes. Infallibility in essence is confined to the universal Manifestations of God; for infallibility is an essential requirement of Their reality, and the essential requirement of a thing is inseparable from the thing itself. The rays are an essential requirement of the sun and are inseparable from it; knowledge is an essential requirement of God and is inseparable from Him; power is an essential requirement of God and is likewise inseparable from Him. If it were possible to separate these from Him, He would not be God. If the rays could be separated from the sun, it would not be the sun. Therefore, were one to imagine the Most Great Infallibility being separated from the universal Manifestation of God, He would not be a universal Manifestation and would lack essential perfection. (“Some Answered Questions,” chapter 45)

But the universal divine Intellect, which transcends nature, is the outpouring grace of the pre-existent Power. It encompasses all existing realities and receives its share of the lights and mysteries of God. It is an all-knowing power, not a power of investigation and sensing. The spiritual power associated with the world of nature is the power of investigation, and it is through investigation that it discovers the realities and properties of things. But the heavenly intellectual power, which is beyond nature, encompasses, knows, and comprehends all things; is aware of the divine mysteries, truths, and inner meanings; and discovers the hidden verities of the Kingdom. (“Some Answered Questions,” chapter 58)

However, this does not imply to any degree that Revelation is incompatible with Reason, or that human beings cannot understand metaphysical reality. Baha’u’llah writes that since our human intellect is limited, we must seek out and follow the Manifestation of God:

The lesser intellect being thus circumscribed, one must search after Him Who is the ultimate Source of knowledge and strive to recognize Him. And should one come to acknowledge that Source round Whom every mind doth revolve, then whatsoever He should ordain is the expression of the dictates of a consummate wisdom. His very Being, even as the sun, is distinct from all else beside Him. The whole duty of man is

to recognize Him; once this hath been achieved, then whatsoever He may please to ordain is binding and in full accordance with the requirements of divine wisdom. Thus have ordinances and prohibitions of every kind been laid down by the Prophets of the past, even unto the earliest times. (From the same Tablet to Mirza Abu'l-Fadl answering questions from Manikchi Sahib, a Zoroastrian (Parsee) enquirer about the teachings of Baha'u'llah, in "The Tabernacle of Divine Unity")

Know assuredly that just as thou firmly believest that the Word of God, exalted be His glory, endureth forever, thou must, likewise, believe with undoubting faith that its meaning can never be exhausted. They who are its appointed interpreters, they whose hearts are the repositories of its secrets, are, however, the only ones who can comprehend its manifold wisdom. Whoso, while reading the Sacred Scriptures, is tempted to choose therefrom whatever may suit him with which to challenge the authority of the Representative of God among men, is, indeed, as one dead, though to outward seeming he may walk and converse with his neighbors, and share with them their food and their drink.

Oh, would that the world could believe Me! Were all the things that lie enshrined within the heart of Bahá, and which the Lord, His God, the Lord of all names, hath taught Him, to be unveiled to mankind, every man on earth would be dumbfounded. How great the multitude of truths which the garment of words can never contain! How vast the number of such verities as no expression can adequately describe, whose significance can never be unfolded, and to which not even the remotest allusions can be made! How manifold are the truths which must remain unuttered until the appointed time is come! Even as it hath been said: "Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it."

Of these truths some can be disclosed only to the extent of the capacity of the repositories of the light of Our knowledge, and the recipients of Our hidden grace. We beseech God to strengthen thee with His power, and enable thee to recognize Him Who is the Source of all knowledge, that thou mayest detach thyself from all human learning, for, "what would it profit any man to strive after learning when he hath already found and recognized Him Who is the Object of all knowledge?" Cleave to the Root of Knowledge, and to Him Who is the Fountain thereof, that thou mayest find

thymself independent of all who claim to be well versed in human learning, and whose claim no clear proof, nor the testimony of any enlightening book, can support. (“Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah,” LXXXIX)

Know verily that Knowledge is of two kinds: Divine and Satanic. The one welletth 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 one is guided by the principle: “Fear ye God; God will teach you”;⁵⁴ the other is but a confirmation of the truth: “Knowledge is the most grievous veil between man and his Creator.” The former bringeth forth the fruit of patience, of longing desire, of true understanding, and love; whilst the latter can yield naught but arrogance, vainglory and conceit. From the sayings of those Masters of holy utterance, Who have expounded the meaning of true knowledge, the odor of these dark teachings, which have obscured the world, can in no wise be detected. The tree of such teachings can yield no result except iniquity and rebellion, and beareth no fruit but hatred and envy. Its fruit is deadly poison; its shadow a consuming fire. How well hath it been said: “Cling unto the robe of the Desire of thy heart, and put thou away all shame; bid the worldly wise be gone, however great their name.”

The heart must needs therefore be cleansed from the idle sayings of men, and sanctified from every earthly affection, so that it may discover the hidden meaning of divine inspiration, and become the treasury of the mysteries of divine knowledge. Thus hath it been said: “He that treadeth the snow-white Path, and followeth in the footsteps of the Crimson Pillar, shall never attain unto his abode unless his hands are empty of those worldly things cherished by men.” This is the prime requisite of whosoever treadeth this path. Ponder thereon, that, with eyes unveiled, thou mayest perceive the truth of these words. (Kitab-i-Iqan)

These passages cited from Baha’u’llah do not assure the believer that he can understand the revealed word with his human intellect, only that he can recognize the Manifestation of God and come to a divinely-illuminated comprehension through dependence upon Him. However, there are other passages in which He does assure believers that they can attain to such a rational comprehension:

Although it is recognized that the contemporary men of learning are highly qualified in philosophy, arts and crafts, yet were anyone to observe with a discriminating eye he would readily comprehend that most of this knowledge hath been acquired from the sages of the past, for it is they who have laid the foundation of philosophy, reared its structure and reinforced its pillars. Thus doth thy Lord, the Ancient of Days, inform thee. The sages aforetime acquired their knowledge from the Prophets, inasmuch as the latter were the Exponents of divine philosophy and the Revealers of heavenly mysteries. Men quaffed the crystal, living waters of Their utterance, while others satisfied themselves with the dregs. Everyone receiveth a portion according to his measure. Verily He is the Equitable, the Wise.

Empedocles¹, who distinguished himself in philosophy, was a contemporary of David, while Pythagoras² lived in the days of Solomon, son of David, and acquired Wisdom from the treasury of prophethood. It is he who claimed to have heard the whispering sound of the heavens and to have attained the station of the angels. In truth thy Lord will clearly set forth all things, if He pleaseth. Verily, He is the Wise, the All-Pervading.

The essence and the fundamentals of philosophy have emanated from the Prophets. That the people differ concerning the inner meanings and mysteries thereof is to be attributed to the divergence of their views and minds. We would fain recount to thee the following: One of the Prophets once was communicating to his people that with which the Omnipotent Lord had inspired Him. Truly, thy Lord is the Inspirer, the Gracious, the Exalted. When the fountain of wisdom and eloquence gushed forth from the wellspring of His utterance and the wine of divine knowledge inebriated those who had sought His threshold, He exclaimed: “Lo! All are filled with the Spirit.” From among the people there was he who held fast unto this statement and, actuated by his own fancies, conceived the idea that the spirit literally penetrateth or entereth into the body, and through lengthy expositions he advanced proofs to vindicate this concept; and groups of people followed in his footsteps. To mention their names at this point, or to give thee a detailed account thereof, would lead to prolixity, and would depart from the main theme. Verily, thy Lord is the All-Wise, the All-Knowing. There was also he who partook of the choice wine whose seal had been removed by

¹Empedocles, ancient Greek philosopher and mystic.

²Pythagoras (570-490 BCE), ancient Greek philosopher and mystic.

the Key of the Tongue of Him Who is the Revealer of the Verses of thy Lord, the Gracious, the Most Generous.

Verily, the philosophers have not denied the Ancient of Days. Most of them passed away deploring their failure to fathom His mystery, even as some of them have testified. Verily, thy Lord is the Adviser, the All-Informed.

Consider Hippocrates³, the physician. He was one of the eminent philosophers who believed in God and acknowledged His sovereignty. After him came Socrates⁴ who was indeed wise, accomplished and righteous. He practiced self-denial, repressed his appetites for selfish desires and turned away from material pleasures. He withdrew to the mountains where he dwelt in a cave. He dissuaded men from worshipping idols and taught them the way of God, the Lord of Mercy, until the ignorant rose up against him. They arrested him and put him to death in prison. Thus relateth to thee this swift-moving Pen. What a penetrating vision into philosophy this eminent man had! He is the most distinguished of all philosophers and was highly versed in wisdom. We testify that he is one of the heroes in this field and an outstanding champion dedicated unto it. He had a profound knowledge of such sciences as were current amongst men as well as of those which were veiled from their minds. Methinks he drank one draught when the Most Great Ocean overflowed with gleaming and life-giving waters. He it is who perceived a unique, a tempered, and a pervasive nature in things, bearing the closest likeness to the human spirit, and he discovered this nature to be distinct from the substance of things in their refined form. He hath a special pronouncement on this weighty theme. Wert thou to ask from the worldly wise of this generation about this exposition, thou wouldst witness their incapacity to grasp it. Verily, thy Lord speaketh the truth but most people comprehend not.

After Socrates came the divine Plato⁵ who was a pupil of the former and occupied the chair of philosophy as his successor. He acknowledged his belief in God and in His signs which pervade all that hath been and shall be. Then came Aristotle⁶, the well-known man of knowledge. He it is who discovered the power of gaseous matter. These men who stand out as leaders of the people and are preeminent among them,

³Hippocrates, ancient Greek physician and philosopher.

⁴Socrates (d. 399 BCE), ancient Greek philosopher.

⁵Plato (428-348 BCE), ancient Greek philosopher.

⁶Aristotle (384-322 BCE), ancient Greek philosopher.

one and all acknowledged their belief in the immortal Being Who holdeth in His grasp the reins of all sciences.

I will also mention for thee the invocation voiced by Balínús⁷ who was familiar with the theories put forward by the Father of Philosophy⁸ regarding the mysteries of creation as given in his chrysolite tablets, that everyone may be fully assured of the things We have elucidated for thee in this manifest Tablet, which, if pressed with the hand of fairness and knowledge, will yield the spirit of life for the quickening of all created things. Great is the blessedness of him who swimmeth in this ocean and celebrateth the praise of his Lord, the Gracious, the Best-Beloved. Indeed the breezes of divine revelation are diffused from the verses of thy Lord in such wise that no one can dispute its truth, except those who are bereft of hearing, of vision, of understanding and of every human faculty. Verily thy Lord beareth witness unto this, yet the people understand not. (Lawh-i-Hikmat, in Tablets of Baha'u'llah)

'Abdu'l-Baha referred to some of these philosophers in selected Tablets and talks:

It is furthermore a matter of record in numerous historical works that the philosophers of Greece such as Pythagoras, acquired the major part of their philosophy, both divine and material, from the disciples of Solomon. And Socrates after having eagerly journeyed to meet with some of Israel's most illustrious scholars and divines, on his return to Greece established the concept of the oneness of God and the continuing life of the human soul after it has put off its elemental dust. Ultimately, the ignorant among the Greeks denounced this man who had fathomed the inmost mysteries of wisdom, and rose up to take his life; and then the populace forced the hand of their ruler, and in council assembled they caused Socrates to drink from the poisoned cup. (The Secret of Divine Civilization)

It is as thou hast written, not philosophers in general but narrow-minded materialists that are meant. As to deistic philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, they are indeed worthy of esteem and of the highest praise, for they have rendered distinguished services to mankind. In like manner we regard the

⁷Balinus in Arabic is Apollonius of Tyana (15-98 CE), celebrated Hermetic philosopher and mystic.

⁸Idris, a prophet cited in the Qur'an, is the Father of Philosophy according to Muslim historians. He is often associated with Enoch, with Hermes Trismegistus and with Thoth.

materialistic, accomplished, moderate philosophers, who have been of service (to mankind). (Tablet to Dr. Forel)

O thou handmaid of God! It is recorded in eastern histories that Socrates journeyed to Palestine and Syria and there, from men learned in the things of God, acquired certain spiritual truths; that when he returned to Greece, he promulgated two beliefs: one, the unity of God, and the other, the immortality of the soul after its separation from the body; that these concepts, so foreign to their thought, raised a great commotion among the Greeks, until in the end they gave him poison and killed him. (SWAB, #25)

Such was their progress that the philosophers of Greece would come to seek knowledge from the learned men of Israel. Among them was Socrates, who came to Syria and acquired from the children of Israel the teachings of the oneness of God and the immortality of the spirit. He then returned to Greece and promulgated these teachings, whereupon the people of that land rose up in opposition to him, accused him of impiety, arraigned him before the court, and condemned him to death by poison. (“Some Answered Questions,” chapter 5)

Philosophy is of two kinds: natural and divine. Natural philosophy seeks knowledge of physical verities and explains material phenomena, whereas divine philosophy deals with ideal verities and phenomena of the spirit. The field and scope of natural philosophy have been greatly enlarged, and its accomplishments are most praiseworthy, for it has served humanity. But according to the evidence of present world conditions divine philosophy—which has for its object the sublimation of human nature, spiritual advancement, heavenly guidance for the development of the human race, attainment to the breaths of the Holy Spirit and knowledge of the verities of God—has been outdistanced and neglected. Now is the time for us to make an effort and enable it to advance apace with the philosophy of material investigation so that awakening of the ideal virtues may progress equally with the unfoldment of the natural powers. In the same proportion that the body of man is developing, the spirit of man must be strengthened; and just as his outer perceptions have been quickened, his inner intellectual powers must be sensitized so that he need not rely wholly upon tradition and human precedent. In divine questions we must not

depend entirely upon the heritage of tradition and former human experience; nay, rather, we must exercise reason, analyze and logically examine the facts presented so that confidence will be inspired and faith attained. Then and then only the reality of things will be revealed to us. The philosophers of Greece—such as Aristotle, Socrates, Plato and others—were devoted to the investigation of both natural and spiritual phenomena. In their schools of teaching they discoursed upon the world of nature as well as the supernatural world. Today the philosophy and logic of Aristotle are known throughout the world. Because they were interested in both natural and divine philosophy, furthering the development of the physical world of mankind as well as the intellectual, they rendered praiseworthy service to humanity. This was the reason of the triumph and survival of their teachings and principles. Man should continue both these lines of research and investigation so that all the human virtues, outer and inner, may become possible. The attainment of these virtues, both material and ideal, is conditioned upon intelligent investigation of reality, by which investigation the sublimity of man and his intellectual progress is accomplished. Forms must be set aside and renounced; reality must be sought. We must discover for ourselves where and what reality is. (The Promulgation of Universal Peace, #105)

In the splendor of the reign of Solomon their sciences and arts advanced to such a degree that even the Greek philosophers journeyed to Jerusalem to sit at the feet of the Hebrew sages and acquire the basis of Israelitish law. According to eastern history this is an established fact. Even Socrates visited the Jewish doctors in the Holy Land, consorting with them and discussing the principles and basis of their religious belief. After his return to Greece he formulated his philosophical teaching of divine unity and advanced his belief in the immortality of the spirit beyond the dissolution of the body. Without doubt, Socrates absorbed these verities from the wise men of the Jews with whom he came in contact. Hippocrates and other philosophers of the Greeks likewise visited Palestine and acquired wisdom from the Jewish prophets, studying the basis of ethics and morality, returning to their country with contributions which have made Greece famous. (The Promulgation of Universal Peace, #112)

Even the celebrated philosophers of Greece journeyed to Jerusalem in order to study with the Israelitish sages, and many were the lessons of philosophy and wisdom they

received. Among these philosophers was the famous Socrates. He visited the Holy Land and studied with the prophets of Israel, acquiring principles of their philosophical teaching and a knowledge of their advanced arts and sciences. After his return to Greece he founded the system known as the unity of God. The Greek people rose against him, and at last he was poisoned in the presence of the king. Hippocrates and many other Greek philosophers sat at the feet of the learned Israelitish doctors and absorbed their expositions of wisdom and inner truth. (Promulgation of Universal Peace, #121)

'Abdu'l-Baha also referred to a bestowal of the universal divine knowledge, intellect, wisdom, love and discernment of the Manifestation like a ray of light reflecting in the mirror of the believer's soul:

On that day will the weak of intellect draw on the bounty of the divine, Universal Mind, and they whose life is but abomination will seek out these cleansing, holy breaths. (SWAB, #218)

But infallibility as an attribute is not an essential requirement; rather, it is a ray of the gift of infallibility which shines from the Sun of Truth upon certain hearts and grants them a share and portion thereof. Although these souls are not essentially infallible, yet they are under the care, protection, and unerring guidance of God—which is to say, God guards them from error. Thus there have been many sanctified souls who were not themselves the Daysprings of the Most Great Infallibility, but who have nevertheless been guarded and preserved from error under the shadow of divine care and protection. For they were the channels of divine grace between God and man, and if God did not preserve them from error they would have led all the faithful to fall likewise into error, which would have wholly undermined the foundations of the religion of God and which would be unbecoming and unworthy of His exalted Reality. (“Some Answered Questions,” chapter 45)

Thus, the divinity of God, which is the totality of all perfections, reveals itself in the reality of man—that is, the divine Essence is the sum total of all perfections, and from this station it casts a ray of its splendour upon the human reality. (“Some Answered Questions”, Chapter 50)

This divine intellectual power is confined to the holy Manifestations and the Daysprings of prophethood. A ray of this light falls upon the mirrors of the hearts of the righteous, that they may also receive, through the holy Manifestations, a share and benefit of this power. (“Some Answered Questions,” chapter 58)

The light of this love is kindled, through the knowledge of God, in the lamp of the heart, and its spreading rays illumine the world and bestow upon man the life of the Kingdom...Indeed, love in the human world is a ray of the love of God and a reflection of the grace of His bounty. (“Some Answered Questions,” chapter 84)

To sum up the Baha’i teaching, human reason is compatible, harmonious, and in agreement with divine revelation when the soul of the human being has been illumined with the divine revelation, by acquiring truth from the Manifestation of God, either in person or through His Book. Sometimes human reason can reflect divine truth without having been consciously engaged in studying it from a universally recognized source, such as a prophet of God, a follower of a prophet of God, or the Writings of a prophet of God. In one of His Tablets, ‘Abdu’l-Baha wrote the following about the influence of the Christian Revelation, which applies equally to the Baha’i Revelation and all other prophetic outpourings:

Thou hast written of a verse in the Gospels, asking if at the time of Christ all souls did hear His call. Know that faith is of two kinds. The first is objective faith that is expressed by the outer man, obedience of the limbs and senses. The other faith is subjective, and unconscious obedience to the will of God. There is no doubt that, in the day of a Manifestation such as Christ, all contingent beings possessed subjective faith and had unconscious obedience to His Holiness Christ.

For all parts of the creational world are of one whole. Christ the Manifestor reflecting the divine Sun represented the whole. All the parts are subordinate and obedient to the whole. The contingent beings are the branches of the tree of life while the Messenger of God is the root of that tree. The branches, leaves and fruit are dependent for their existence upon the root of the tree of life. This condition of unconscious obedience constitutes subjective faith. But the discerning faith that consists of true knowledge of God and the comprehension of divine words, of such

faith there is very little in any age. That is why His Holiness Christ said to His followers, "Many are called but few are chosen." (Baha'i World Faith, p. 364)