

Elements of a Bahá'í-Inspired Natural Theology

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Besides the moral and spiritual teachings they contain, the Bahá'í Writings articulate a number of profound philosophical and metaphysical concepts and propositions.

While some of these make clear references to classically-received notions (e.g., Abdu l-Bahá's use of Aristotle's chain of being), others are essentially new (e.g., Abdu l-Bahá's particular way of distinguishing the concepts of emanation and manifestation).

Our task (programme) is to bring together classical notions, Bahá'í notions, and modern notions in one unified system.

The most fundamental logical notion is the causality relation, symbolized by the arrow \rightarrow .

Where A and B are any two phenomena, we write $A \rightarrow B$ to mean B exists by virtue of A, read equivalently as A causes B. Abdu 1- Bahá affirms that existence without a cause is impossible. This leads to the first principle of causality, the Principle of Sufficient Reason, first explicitly enunciated by Leibniz.

C.1. Every existent phenomenon B is either self-caused (self-sufficient), $B \rightarrow B$, or else other-caused (exists by reason of some other phenomenon), $A \rightarrow B$, where $A \neq B$, and never both.

The transitivity of causality follows from the definition of that relation:


C.2. $A \rightarrow B$ & $B \rightarrow C$ imply $A \rightarrow C$.

Abdu l-Bahá describes (the essence of) God as absolutely self-sufficient and the ultimate cause of all existence. Hence, we assume:

G.1. There is a phenomenon G which is a cause of every phenomenon that ever has or will exist. Thus, for all phenomena A, $G \rightarrow A$.

It follows immediately that $G \rightarrow G$, i.e., that G is self-sufficient. G is also unique, for assume there is another self-sufficient G . Then, $G \rightarrow G \rightarrow G$ (universality of G). But G cannot be both self-sufficient and other-caused (by C. 1). Hence, $G = G$.

Causality may be indirect, $A \rightarrow B$,

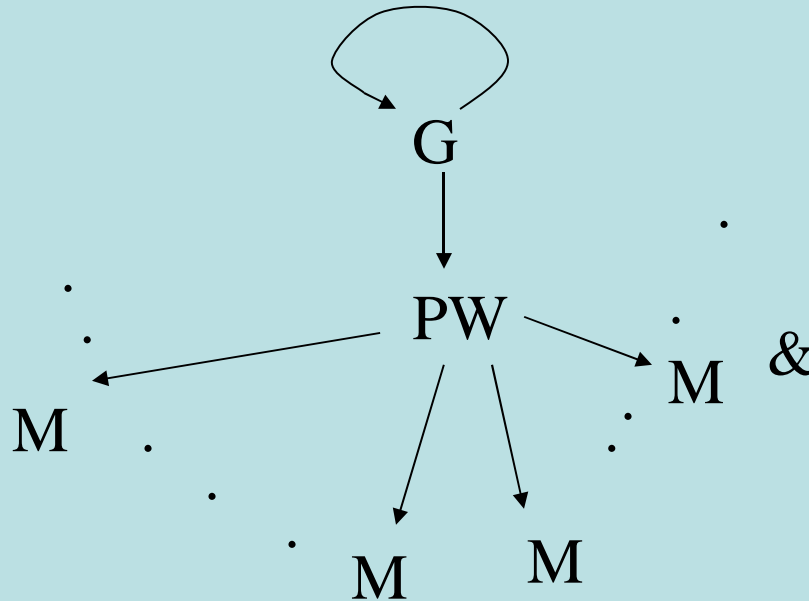


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graph TD; A --> B; A --> C; C --> B;
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where A, B, and C are all different,
or else direct, $A \rightarrow B$ and there exists
no interpolant cause C.

The primal will is the first emanation from God (SAQ). It is also the cause of every other created thing (SAQ). Thus, the primal will is the only thing directly caused by the essence of God. But Abdu l-Bahá also says that God is the origin of the cause of causes. Taking these latter to be the Manifestations (ref. ToU),

we thus have the following relationships for the top part of reality (existence):



Comments: The arrow from G to PW is causality by emanation (SAQ). The arrow from PW to a given M involves both manifestation (appearance of the PW is another form - recall Shoghi Effendi's statement that each Manifestation is a complete incarnation of the names and attributes of God (WOB)) and emanation (of the created soul of the Manifestation). Causality of PW by G is certainly direct. However, taking into account that the soul of each Manifestation has a discrete beginning, the causality of a given M by PW is (partially) indirect.

Let us call the self-sufficiency of G a circular causal chain of length 1 : $G \rightarrow G$. Then C.1 and C.2 together imply that there can exist no circular causal chains of length greater than 1.

Suppose, for example that $A \rightarrow B$ and $B \rightarrow A$, with $A \neq B$ (a circular causal chain of length two). We thus have:

$A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A \rightarrow B$, which by transitivity (C.2) says that A and B are each self-caused and also other-caused (each by the other). But this contradicts C.1. Thus, such a chain cannot exist. A similar argument excludes all causal chains of length greater than 1, whether finite or infinite.

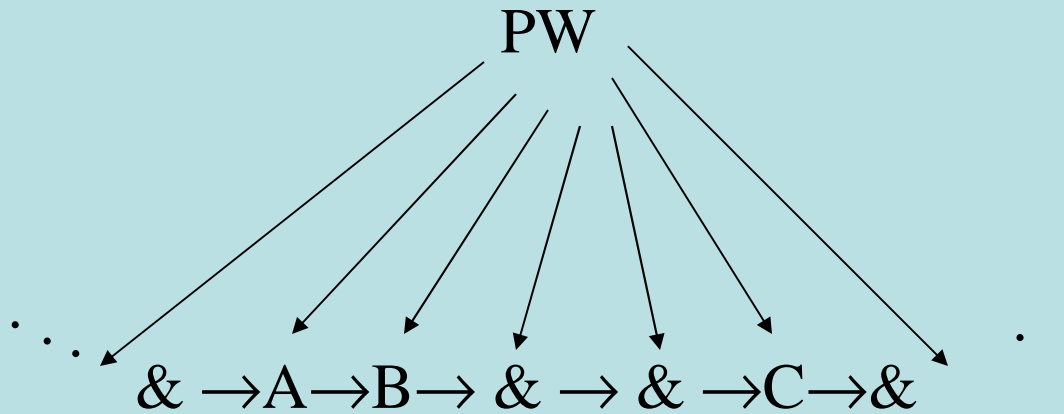
But what about infinitely-descending causal chains? These are arbitrarily excluded by classical philosophy (e.g. Aristotle's principle of infinite regression). However, Abdu'l-Bahá does not specifically exclude them, saying only that the *process* of causality cannot go on indefinitely without there being an ultimate, universal cause (TAF).

In fact, in the Tablet of the Universe, Abdu l-Bahá specifically criticizes classical philosophy for its refusal to deal adequately with the notion of infinity. After all, the Primal Will is capable of creating an infinity of universes, of Manifestations, or of human beings (ToU), why not causes? Indeed, he specifically refers to the PW as the cause of [multiple] causes .

In other words, God is the ultimate cause of the *process* of causation, and not just first in a chain of causes. Since classical philosophy held that causal chains could only be of finite length, all chains had to begin with the one uncaused (universal) cause: $G \rightarrow A_1 \rightarrow \dots \rightarrow A_n$, where we can suppose, without loss of generality, that every causal arrow is direct.

Under this assumption, every existent is only a finite causal distance from the PW, and thus from G (God).

However, Abdu l-Bahá's cause of [all] causes suggests metacausality, i.e., that the PW is the cause not just of other individual causes but also of *systems of causality*. In the case of a system made up of an infinite causal chain, we would thus have the following relationship with the PW.



Comments. (1) By C.2, as soon as PW causes any member of the chain, it thereby causes all subsequent members of the chain. (2) Every member of the chain is an infinite causal distance from PW (i.e., there is an infinity of interpolants between PW and each given member of the chain). (3) The chain does not have to be discrete, but can be dense or even saturated. (4) More fundamentally, PW is here viewed as the ultimate cause of the system itself and not just of its individual components. (5) PW

could also be the first element of a half-infinite dense chain, in which case, again, each subsequent member of the chain would have an infinite causal distance from PW:

$PW \& \rightarrow \& \rightarrow \& A \rightarrow \& \&$

The point of all of this is that logic does not compel us to consider only finite causal chains, nor does it restrict us to only one type of infinite chain. We can thus see that the structure of reality in terms of causality alone could be extremely rich, with many different causal schemata. However, we will now consider other relations between and among phenomena.

Composites and Entities

Nature is that condition, that reality, which in appearance consists in life and death, or, in other words, in the composition and decomposition of all things .
(Abdu l-Bahá, SAQ)

Moreover,

This Nature is subjected [by
God] to an absolute organization,
to determined laws, to a complete
order . . . it has no intelligence,
no will (Ibid.)

Thus, material entities are composites (having other material entities as components), whereas spiritual entities (such as the human soul) are noncomposites (unified wholes). Collections of entities (think of the set of two souls) are also composite, as is clear (having each of the two souls as a component).

We will represent the componenthood relation by the symbol \in . Thus, where A and B are two phenomena, $A \in B$ means

A is a component of B . It is here understood that for A to be a component of B , A and B must be different. We thus explicitly assume:

E.1. For all phenomena A , $A \notin A$. No phenomenon is a component of itself.

In the light of E.1, we thus have that every phenomenon B is either composite ($A \in B$ for some $A \neq B$) or else *simple*, i.e., noncomposite (for no A does $A \in B$ hold). It is clear that noncomposites are entities (what Abdu'l-Bahá calls beings), and it is also clear that some, but not all, composites are entities.

For example, your body is an entity, but the above example of the set consisting of your soul and my soul is not an entity. Among composites, how to distinguish between those that are entities and those that are not entities? We know that spiritual entities are simples and that the essence of God, G, is spiritual. Thus we have:

E.2. G is noncomposite.

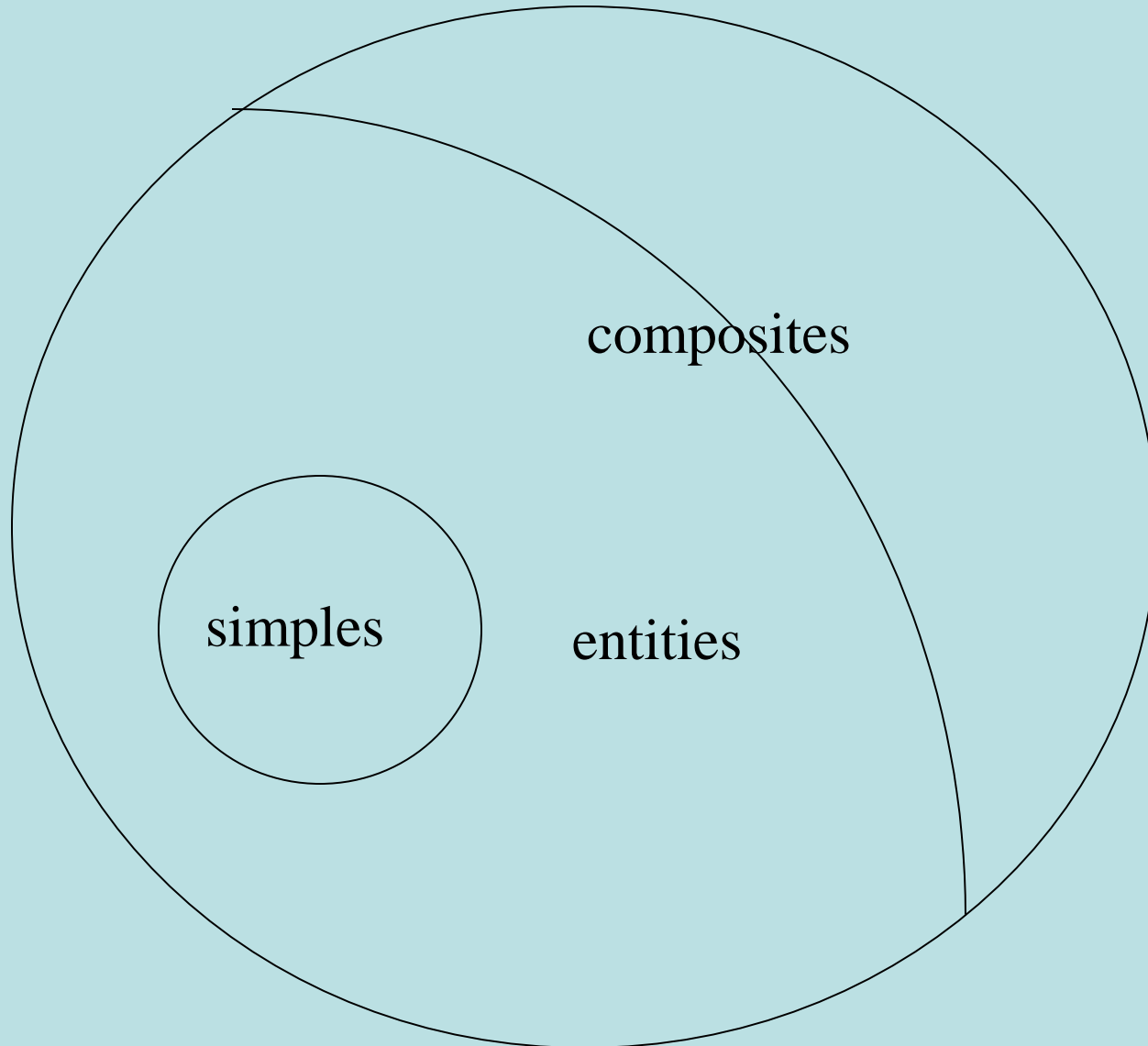
More generally, a purely logical necessary condition for entityship was given in 1925 by John von Neumann, one of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century.

E.3. If a phenomenon B is an entity, then $B \in C$, for some $C \neq B$.

Thus, composites *have* components, while entities *are* components. Since we assume noncomposites to be entities, they are all components, by E.2. We thus have the following ontological categories with respect to entityship and componenthood.

Phenomena can be simple or composite. They can also be components or not. Finally they can be entities (beings) or not. All simples are entities and thus components. Some composites are entities and some are not. Let V symbolize the collection of all components. Then, we have the following relationships:

V = all components



Let us use the term `system` for composites generally (whether components or not). We use the componenthood relationship to define another `containment` notion that applies only to systems: Given two systems A and B , we say that A is a subsystem of B , written $A \subset B$, if every component of A is also a component of B .

Let us now consider again the collection V of all components of systems. Every system A that is not a component of V will be a subsystem of V , since every component of A will also be a component of V . Thus, every existing phenomenon is either a component of a subsystem of V .

Thus, V is the universe of existence since every existent is contained in V either as a component or a subsystem (and, in some cases, both). In particular, the noncomposite entity G is a component of V . This is just a convoluted way of saying God exists .

Also, since G is a universal cause, $G \rightarrow V$.

We now need to think about the interactions between the relations of causality and composition. Since any composite will depend on its parts (whether components or subsystems), we have the following potency principle :

EC.1. If $A \rightarrow B$ and E is a component or a subsystem of B , then $A \rightarrow E$.

The logic of EC.1 is that any phenomenon A that is capable, in and of itself, of producing (the whole of the) phenomenon B must, in the process of so doing, produce all of the parts of which B is constituted.

Another principle linking causality and composition is the limitation principle : EC.2. If E is a component of B, B cannot be a cause of E.

Here, the simple point is that B only exists when all of its components exists and thus cannot have pre-existed one of its own components (on which its existence depends).

Thus, EC.2 says that a whole cannot be a cause of one of its own components. However, the contrary case is not excluded. For example, G is part of reality V and G causes V (which, by EC.1, tells us that G must be self-caused, but we already knew that).

Values

A third relation that helps articulate the structure of reality is the value relation, which applies *only to beings (entities) and not to arbitrary composites*. Thus, where A and B are entities, $A \geq B$ means that A is higher (no less valuable) than B .

It may well be that two different beings A and B have the same value, $A \geq B$, $A \leq B$ and $A \neq B$. It is also possible that two different entities are valuewise non comparable ($A \neq B$, but neither $A \geq B$ nor $A \leq B$ hold). However, there is an important principle linking causality and value, the *refinement principle*:

V.1. Where A and B are entities, if $A \rightarrow B$, then $A \geq B$.

The refinement principle is a precise formulation of the philosophical principle, explicitly endorsed by

Abdu l-Bahá, that a cause must be greater than its effect . It remains to gain some idea of what greater than means.

For material (composite) entities,
greater than means essentially
more structurally complex than .
Thus, humans are above animals,
which are above plants, which are
above minerals. This is clear from
Abdu l-Bahá s many statements
of the chain of being (e.g., SAQ).

For abstract (simple) entities, the value relation is that of universal to particular. Abdu l-Bahá has said (TU) that, in this hierarchy, everything is universal to what is below it and particular to what is above it. This is illustrated by the following example, essentially due to Plato.

The universal human, embodied (realized) in the Person of the Manifestation.

SW

The individual human soul, which imperfectly (relatively) reflects but does not attain absolutely the Attributes of God.

MW

The human body, which is a (temporary) vehicle of the Soul, and inhabits three dimensions.

Any two-dimensional image of the body, such as a reflection in a mirror.