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The Conceptual in Human Nature: Learning to Perceive the World

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Abstract

Human beings are conceptual in ways unique to our species, different in kind from animal rationality. Our conceptual capacity goes beyond the cognitive and shapes our emotions, our moral and spiritual capabilities and our perception of the world. That conceptual capacity is formed by culture and language where language plays a central role in how we experience the world. The role of language, especially spiritual or religious language, can inform our perception of the world in ways that represent genuine 'spiritual perception' of the material, social and spiritual dimensions of reality. Human beings' conceptual capabilities are fallible, even in how we use perception as a capacity for knowing the world. Conditions in modernity have increased our vulnerability to fallibility. Consequently, collective exercise of our conceptual capacities in deliberation and coordinated assessments of reality are more necessary than ever. Science and religion are influential models of how collective deliberation, or consultation, enhances our conceptual capabilities and the ways in which perception takes in a world that is both material and spiritual.

Keywords

conceptual
perception
spiritual
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human nature

Introduction

This essay looks at insights from some contemporary philosophy that are correlated with Bahá'í concepts, helpful in understanding the conceptual in human nature. Our conceptual capacity involves our understanding, imagination, memory and actions in the world. It also involves how we perceive the world. The most we can manage to explore in an essay is a mere sketch of our conceptual capacity, and here we focus primarily on how we know the world by way of facts, and especially facts that perception of the world gives us.

In looking at the issue of our conceptual capacity, four ideas emerge. First, our conceptual capacity is unique to the human being as a capacity of mind different in kind from animal rationality. Second, conceptual capacity is a broad human capacity beyond the merely cognitive. It informs and mediates our moral, affective and spiritual sensibilities and perceptions. Third, individual conceptual capacities are embedded and nourished in the collective exercise of our conceptual capacities as a human community. Our conceptual capacity is a learned capacity developed through our upbringing and culture in a shared world in which language plays a central role. Fourth, conceptual capacity includes perception as a capacity for knowledge. That includes the capacity for what we might call 'spiritual perception'. This essay aims to provide reasonable grounds for the idea that 'spiritual perception'

can play a central role in how we come to understand and engage the world in both its spiritual and material reality.[1] One of the implications of this is an understanding of 'spiritual' as neither opaque, mysterious or of only inner subjectivity. Spirituality is about seeing and acting in the world, in the here and now, and in the collective life of humanity – though there are other dimensions to its meaning too.

It should be stated straight away that the functioning of our conceptual capacity is both limited and enabled by the brain and its neurological health, but the importance of our understanding of those physical factors does not undermine the non-physical nature of the mind and consciousness that set the terms and possibilities of human conceptual engagement with the world. This essay will come to include, among the features of the mind, qualities of moral, spiritual and affective conceptuality. However much the mind and its moral and spiritual capacities work necessarily through the material constraints and physical properties available to them, the mind itself and its conceptual capacity are not well understood by an approach that is constrained by a worldview of materialism or naturalism. The relationship of mind and brain, and generally of the spiritual and the material, is an unavoidable issue in an essay such as this, but understanding the dynamic between the material and the spiritual will occupy humanity's intellectual interests for a long time to come, and is not of central concern here.

In section 1, the essay looks at two ways philosophy has conceived of reason as a way to approach issues important to how we view conceptual capacities. The distinction is between, first, the formidable reasoning power of science as it comes to know reality, and second, what philosophers call 'practical reason' – how we necessarily know and engage the world by way of reasons, including our beliefs, desires, interests, values and our immediate perception of situations, problems and possibilities that are relevant to our lives.[2] These two separate approaches to how mind understands the world, science and practical reason, are thought to be fundamentally different though both involve the use of our conceptual capacities. This essay comes to the view that we needn't hold to that distinction, important in some respects, too strongly.[3]

In section 2 the essay summarizes our conceptual nature, focusing in particular on our reliance on facts, and more especially facts of perception in so far as perception is a capacity to know the world. This sketch of an understanding of our conceptual nature as a capacity unique to our species draws on insights of John McDowell correlated with explanations using Bahá'í concepts about human conceptuality.[4]

In section 3, we consider McDowell's views on how we come to learn and develop our conceptual capacity through our upbringing, culture and language. The process he describes is considered from within a worldview of naturalism, albeit one that McDowell extends generously to include features of human reality that, from a Bahá'í perspective, are understood more from the perspective of a spiritual worldview.

Section 4 considers our fallibility and vulnerability to errors in individual conceptual capacities. Increasing vulnerability to error is related to conditions of modern life. McDowell's concept of learning involves culture and language, but he does not consider collective conceptual capacity in any

detail, but simply as the matrix within which individual capacity is learned. Individual fallibility, recognized by McDowell, is today heightened by information overload, social complexity and fragmentation of experience at a time of hyper-individualism. These conditions confound our capacity to make rapid judgements by way of perception as a capacity for knowledge. As language, upbringing and our culture are central to learning processes, a slower and collective exercise of human conceptual capacity can serve as a corrective to errors in individual judgements about the world, and help adjust and continue to educate and refine our conceptual capacities including our capacity of perception.

The essay concludes by considering the concept of 'spiritual perception' as a feature of perceptional capacity in general. It involves simply seeing the world as it is, but by way of a guided and intentional practice of that capacity, learning how to perceive the world spiritually through appropriate attention to language, upbringing and experience. If our perception as a capacity for knowledge is to be improved, like other human capacities, it requires systematic and intentional consideration rather than being left to the vagaries of an unreflected, fragmented and nominalist modern culture. Spiritual perception is an aspect of a refined conceptual nature, and by understanding its relationship to our more general conceptuality, the idea of spirituality is brought into relationship with practical reason.

1. The 'Space of Reasons' and the 'Space of Natural Law'

Philosophy has long recognized the difference between science and what philosophy calls 'practical reason'. The distinction between *'theoria'* and *'phronesis'* (practical wisdom) was established in antiquity. Modern philosophy keeps an approximate version of that distinction, struggling with how to bring our perception and understanding of the practical and moral challenges of life into relationship with the scientific understanding of a reality of invisible physical forces, causality and natural law.

In the 1950s, the American philosopher, Wilfrid Sellars, worked out his particular version of that distinction between practical reason and science, between the knowledge that we use as we think, talk, act and carry forward our individual and collective lives, and the conventional way we conceive of science as theoretical knowledge that explains reality beyond mere appearances. Our practical reason relies, in his words, on a 'manifest image' of the world, and science, on 'a scientific image'.[5]

In our practical lives, we manage within a social and material reality, attending carefully to the intentions and projects of individuals and communities, the day-to-day patterns, norms and conventions of society and institutions. How we perceive the social and material world by way of our perception plays a large role in this. We rely on a range of different kinds of reasons to explain to ourselves, and to others, why we conduct our lives in the way we do, how and why we make judgements to do this or that, take actions and express our views on matters important to us. We pursue a process of giving and taking, accepting and rejecting reasons in our personal lives and in deliberation with others.[6] Sellars called this 'the space of reasons', and contrasted it with that 'space of natural law and causality' that is the realm of scientific discourse.[7] Sellars felt the scientific view was the more important one, 'science is the measure of all things,

of what is that it is, and what is not that it is not'.[8] Practical reason is not so much about providing empirical descriptions as it is about giving our reasons for our intentions and our actions in 'the space of reasons'.

Understanding this distinction has to do with a scientific view of reality constituted by entities and forces that follow laws of causality and relationships that are determined. The human mind, however, and the nature of reasoning that goes on in our practical lives, has the quality of freedom and spontaneity. How then, the question is asked, does the reality that science studies, a world determined by law-like regularities, reside in the same world as 'the space of reasons' with its quality of freedom and spontaneity? 'Cause' is central to 'the space of natural law', and 'reasons' are central to 'the space of reasons'. Yet, physical 'cause' and human 'reason' are entirely different in character.

2. The Conceptual Nature of Human Beings

In order to think a little differently about the 'space of reasons' and the 'space of natural law', it is helpful to gain a deeper view of the conceptual nature of human beings, relying on the project of John McDowell.[9]

McDowell developed a set of arguments that he feels dispels our anxieties about the place of mind in the natural world. He argues, not from an ontological perspective that tries to bring mind and brain together as one substance or even directly related, but from an epistemological perspective as to how we understand and know the mind in a way that brings our conceptual capacities within a worldview of naturalism in order to avoid an otherwise 'supernatural' quality to the operations of mind.

McDowell developed his understanding of the conceptual nature of human beings by reflecting on Kant's efforts to overcome the weaknesses in two contrasting efforts we make to understand how we come to know reality: the rationalists and the empiricists. Rationalists generated views of reality that were brilliantly reasoned but speculative in their effort to determine how reality was constituted. Empiricists emphasized the 'empirical world' by explaining that our sensations of the world are brought into the mind as discrete sensations, and through their association, we gain a picture of the world.[10]

Kant attempted an alternative conception because of difficulties with both views. The rationalist approach had little connection to our actual experience of the world, and the empiricist view failed to account for how mere sensations, in succession, can possibly give an understanding of reality with order, structure and causality, let alone how we come to know our mind and its conceptuality. Kant viewed the mind as providing the forms and order (time, space and causality) by which new sensate experience is given structure and conceptual reasonability. Kant came to the conclusion that 'without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions [or 'sensations' in the vocabulary of his times] without concepts are blind'.[11] McDowell drew on this insight in the development of his thinking about how we experience the world by way of the only consciousness we have of it, by way of our unique human conceptual capacity.[12]

This term 'conceptual capacity' refers to how we understand, know and engage with the world by way of abstract concepts, or general ideas – 'universals'

in technical philosophical language – and where such concepts bear relationships to each other. Facts, commitments and the judgements involved in both, operate in our minds by way of our experience and perception of the world. In our thoughts and actions, we understand and act by relying on abstract ideas or concepts. Our facility to perceive, think, talk and act, necessarily uses concepts:[13] and that is what constitutes our conceptual capacity.[14]

John McDowell argues that this conceptual or knowing capacity is unique to the human species. McDowell's understanding is most easily understood in his contrast of human conceptuality with animal intelligence, a contrast also used by a Bahá'í approach to this same issue.[15] For McDowell, animals have a differential response capacity,[16] which explains their animal 'rationality'. They may appear to reason in a manner that might compare to human reasoning, but they actually respond directly to an environment to which they are acutely sensitive and well-endowed by their evolved instincts and their acute memory of that environment.

Human beings engage and respond, not to an environment, but to a world that is shaped conceptually where even perceptual states for human beings are mediated by the conceptual in order to be taken into consciousness. The quality that allows consciousness to be receptive to the world by perception relies on a conceptual idea of a world that is already 'there' in mind, in some background sense. A perceptual state is always a conceptual state as it takes in a sensible deliverance as a feature of a world accessible to the mind. The particular feature can only be perceived as a feature available to possible placement within that world, or close enough to allow relative adjustments to that world as we grow in our knowledge of it. Human perception is not merely an occasion of sentient capacity at work, but always of conceptual responsiveness to 'a world' – a sapient capacity – while the animal's responsiveness is to that of an environment and is only sentient.

This is close to the way that 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains our human conceptual nature as one that is distinct from animal functioning,[17] writing that 'the animal perceives sensible things but cannot perceive conceptual realities'.[18] 'Of this power of discovery which belongeth to the human mind, this power which can grasp abstract and universal ideas, the animal remaineth totally ignorant...[19] 'The animal cannot conceive of intellect. Of these powers it is bereft. Therefore, these powers are peculiar to man...'[20] Human beings have this extraordinary capacity, involving of course our faculties of sense, but also imagination, understanding, comprehension and memory, while of these animals have only sensory powers and memory.[21]

> ...in man there is present this supernatural force or faculty which discovers the realities of things and which possesses the power of idealization or intellection...The mind itself, reason itself, is an ideal reality and not tangible.[22]

'Abdu'l-Bahá's comments give a possible explanation of what is apparent in contemporary animal studies. The demonstration of remarkable 'animal intelligence' is by way of the animal's heightened sensory acuity, added to which is a kind of animal memory for the sensate that, 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes, is often superior to human memory.[23] Those two powers working together can exhibit an impressive 'reasoning' ability by way of exceptional differential

response repertoires, learned over repeated trials in animal training. However impressive that capacity, it remains – in the absence of the conceptual, and the abstract language of human conceptuality – a rationality of a quite different kind than the human.

McDowell writes of the 'world' shaped conceptually by the human mind,

> ...we could not recognize capacities operative in experience as conceptual at all were it not for the way they are integrated into a rationally organized network of capacities for active adjustment of one's thinking to the deliverances of experience. That is what a repertoire of empirical concepts is. The integration serves to place even the most immediate judgements of experience as possible elements in a worldview.[24]

From the Bahá'í perspective, the 'world' is also shaped by the conceptions of the human mind. That is one way of understanding the Bahá'í passage:

> To whatever heights the mind of the most exalted of men may soar, however great the depths which the detached and understanding heart can penetrate, such mind and heart can never transcend that which is the creature of their own conceptions and the product of their own thoughts.[25]

Our understanding of the conceptual should not be confused with an excessive intellectualism. Our conceptual nature includes feelings and sensibilities. That we are self-conscious about our feelings and sensibility, come to understand them, and give them expression and communicate with others about them by way of language, provides evidence of our conceptual involvement with feeling and sensibility. Feelings and sensibilities are informed by the conceptual and are a form of perception with conceptual content.

> I have claimed that we make sense of rational relations between experience and judgement only in the context of an equation between the space of concepts and the space of reasons. Thought can bear on empirical reality only because to be a thinker at all is to be at home in the space of reasons.[26]

Facts

Our conceptual capacity as human beings relies on facts in order for us to know and engage the world. The facts we take to be true of the world, and the way facts work together in shaping our understanding of the world, require our commitment to their truth – that we claim to know such facts. And, of course, facts can be about the world of our mental concepts, facts that we have about commitments, desires, hopes, values, beliefs, and all facts bear relationships, some to each other, and to various kinds of facts.[27] Facts can be about complex realities, scientific findings and mental concepts like desires and beliefs, or about situations. Our world is in this way heterogenous, made up of physical, social and mental realities. They can be about composites, and perceptions are never single sense data but always a composite.

Facts and commitments, together, are basic elements in human reasoning, as well as human agency or empowerment.[28] Holding facts that

we take to be true is our way of coming to know an objective world. We have the world in mind by way of the facts we feel entitled to know by way of self-conscious judgements regarding their reliability. Their warrant depends on our having learned to rely on the capacity of our perception to know facts to be true or by the relationship of more abstract, non-perceptual facts that are logically or substantially supported by their inferential relations with each other among the many facts that give shape to the world we know. The facts and reasons that give them warrant are related to each other by inferences, of the paradigmatic logical form, 'if... then...'. Facts rely on reasons as premises or implications in support of the fact at issue, and facts are available as premises or implications for other facts.[29] In the deepening and multiplying of those facts in relationship, we come to know a world we take to be objective.

This is a way to understand something of the structure of our conceptual understanding of the world, both in its physical as well as its social and self-conscious nature. We hold facts, not as isolated pieces of information, but as statements about reality that hang together with what else we know about reality. If a fact is interrogated, we make efforts to trace its inferential basis to other facts that give support to our claim to know something. In this way, we shape 'a world' with which we engage by placing our experience of it in relationship to what we already know.

Facts are judgements, thoughts or statements – but understood as propositions whether spoken or merely thought. In propositional form, facts are basic to our conceptual view of the world. They are 'primitive' or fundamental elements in the structure of how we think of the world. As a proposition or sentence, a fact is a composite, and not a singular term or object term. Singular terms (nouns and predicates) take their meaning from their function and place in the sentence by how we actually learn language and how to think. They are not as basic as facts or propositions in our conversation, discourses and understanding of the world.[30] The ensemble of inter-related facts we hold to be true provide the framework for our understanding of that world. If there was no 'world' constituted by facts we know, we would be unable to know any single fact about that 'world'.

We know or express a fact, accompanied by a commitment to it, but that does not guarantee its validity. Validity is something different. We believe we have reasons, and are prepared if necessary to justify the fact. But human fallibility is always there, so a fact may not be valid since reasons may be wrong, and adjustments will need to be made. Corrections and new facts with renewed commitments come with effort. But if the responsibility that accompanies a fact is missing, by bad faith or lack of truthfulness, that is a more serious problem and would require another kind of essay than this one.[31]

Perception as a Capacity for Knowledge

Perception of facts about the world is one category of facts of central importance to our practical lives. Our perceptions are themselves facts, not mere sense data or isolated visual or auditory arrays. They are facts that we know in conceptual form since sense data or isolated sensory arrays are not of the nature of the conceptual, and we have learned to perceive the world out there, not the irritations of nerve endings in the eye or ear. Without

that conceptual, conscious quality or nature, they could not be brought into consciousness. Our awareness of anything in consciousness can only be of something that has already a quality of consciousness and a relationship with other facts available to consciousness, and where a deliverance from our experience is taken up by a perceptual state that is itself a conscious state.

For instance, when we see a table, we do see a table. We do not see a two-dimensional patch of brown with objects projecting from our particular perspective with its quadrilateral shape on the retina of the eye. Of course, on reflection we can analytically divide the table into bits of sense data that are involved in our seeing table. But that analysis is conceptual, and only possible once the perceptual state, that is already a state of knowing what is perceived, is turned over in the mind in a self-conscious act of further understanding. In the initial perception, we do see a table since we have learned to see a table, not a combination of colours or shapes of different dimensions in our visual array. The composite we see is already a composite as we perceive it.

There have been, of course, in philosophy important questions raised about the claim that perception is a direct way of knowing, but McDowell counters that scepticism in Western philosophy. It is a scepticism that has its reasons: we do have hallucinations, see mirages, and images and objects that we find later were mistaken judgements about what we perceived. But rather than being sceptical of our perceptual capacity to know the world, we should realize that such mistakes by their self-correcting nature count only as a recognition of our fallibility in perceptual knowing, not our inability to perceive the world. It is usually our perceptual capacity of knowing that also corrects the initial mistake. There is an intellectual overreach to say that we cannot perceive, and perceive directly, facts about the world – so argues McDowell.[32]

McDowell understands perception, not by a two-step process of considering a sensation, a patch or some visual array, then thinking or reflecting, 'is it a table?', and only then deciding we have seen a table, but within the act of perception itself. We know how to see a table. It is an immediate conceptual fact of direct perception, and something we can claim to know. Of course, we do have other facts in mind that provide an inferential basis for also accepting this perceptual fact: the lighting conditions are good, I know what a table looks like from various angles, I can recognize a table even if made of an unexpected material. We have learned how to see a table by our culture and language acquisition.

While there have been many efforts to explain the gap between a non-conceptual physical happening in the sense faculties and brain, and the perception of the world in the mind, such efforts have failed to offer a satisfying explanation of the way a mere datum, physically sensed, becomes, as an immediate perception, an object or a recognized feature of a situation. Selectivity in perception is part of our learning and is itself inexplicable without an understanding of the conceptual basis for the world, informed by the conceptual as to what is salient and what isn't.[33]

This account of our learning to see a table also applies to our learning to perceive others, social interactions, under various concepts available to our learning by way of language used in the world by significant others. We

have learned to perceive moral scenarios that become paradigmatic for us and are generalized as patterns in the same way we have learned a generalized pattern of what a table is. We have concepts in mind of tables and objects, and other concepts of various kinds of interactions that are loving, funny, awkward, and the long list of discriminations in our social world is enormous – just as our conceptual discriminations in our physical environment are enormous.

So, in taking account of such different worlds, and of how our perception and experience of the world depends on the conceptualization of the world, we realize this is not merely at the level of the perception of objects, but there is also a genuine perception of moral facts and situations that are included in McDowell's considerations,[34] as it is in the Bahá'í view by my reading. It is a matter of learning to 'see', to perceive by way of culture, language acquisition and experiences with others in life and where language is present, serving as a guiding rail in the engine of our learning to see a world rich in qualities – physical, social, moral and spiritual. Feelings, emotions, the exercise of spiritual and moral sensibilities, are not merely interpreted conceptually as a second stage in understanding, but they are lived and felt and perceived at the level of the self-conscious deliverance of such feelings and sensibilities to conscious awareness as situations in life are encountered, and learning advances. They are conceptually mediated from the moment of their inception in our minds. Sona Farid-Arbab understands McDowell in this way as she explains moral capacities.[35] Her explanation of 'spiritual sensitivity', which translates McDowell's idea of 'second nature' into the context of her work, illustrates this. This 'spiritual sensitivity' is a kind of perception, and using the words of McDowell she notes it allows for a 'certain sort of requirement which situations impose on behaviour'. 'The reliably kind behavior' has to do with a learned and reliable sensitivity to occasions for kindness – and that is 'a sort of perceptual capacity.'[36]

We learn how to perceive by way of our language coupled with experience in situations calling for kindness, generosity, love and so forth through our upbringing, and by way of accompaniment,[37] how to perceive moral situations and also how to respond to such realities of the world.[38] If that kind of learning, just at the level of perception and action in the light of perception, seems overly demanding and complicated, it seems hardly more difficult than language learning (to which it is surely associated) by infants who from eighteen months to six-year-olds are learning the meaning of a new word every two hours, an astonishing learning rate, along with intricate syntax and creative complexity for language use,[39] just as they are learning complex patterns of norms and conventions signalled by discursive and non-discursive interactions.

That infants learn language on sparse exposure to experience is evidence for 'the general ability to learn very rapidly and accurately from limited and incomplete input. Experiments reveal that eight-month-old children learn to segment speech into words on the basis of nothing but statistical relationships between adjacent sounds, and they do this after only two minutes.'[40] Infants enter quickly into the realm of speech and thought, and gain mastery of vocabulary, syntax and a network of concepts that generates propositional facts about the world; 'language is not an ordinary learned skill; it is,

or has become [for human beings] a mode of perception...essential to the other senses if they are to yield propositional knowledge. Language is the organ of propositional perception...Perception, once we have propositional thought, is direct...in the sense that there are no epistemic intermediaries on which perceptual beliefs are based...'[41]

Language that is of a spiritual nature, with spiritual concepts, is the way by which perception itself becomes spiritual, and though not turning away from the material (for our language is full of that conceptual content), but by providing the necessary language in the context of experience with others, it is language that is learned in propositional or sentence-like forms regarding morality and spirituality (not simply as a list of nouns or predicates).

A reading of Ronald de Sousa and Martha Nussbaum on emotion also suggests, by the same series of arguments, how our perception of paradigmatic scenarios with emotional characteristics are learned or mislearned. Emotions are a form of – often embodied and frequently non-discursive – judgement or evaluation of a scenario, often about matters not under our control. We make judgements about paradigmatic situations that have been 'learned' along with a set of emotional responses – joy, love, happiness – or often 'mislearned' in poorly conceived upbringing and exposure to angry or dysfunctional language and behavioural outbursts. But they are judgements that are at once both affective and conceptual. They can be sound, or often they can go wrong. Yet, even in their 'fallibility' or misdirection and dysfunction they remain conceptual or conceptually informed.[42]

Thus, both moral and emotional responsiveness are also of the conceptual.[43] It should be added here, of course, that the argument regarding emotion as akin to perception, at a minimum analogically, is a complex matter. Emotions are not well classified by distinctive kinds or categories, mixing attitudes, moods, perspectives, projections, involving relationships between self and situation, or as a more objective evaluation of a situation, or self and others – and that kind of study is at an early stage.

In the same way, 'spiritual perception' operates in complex ways, differing from mere perception of objects or colours by the compounding of concepts and especially human presentations and relationships in paradigmatic scenarios that, even so, involve learning through language, a shared world of experience and in accompaniment of significant others so that perceptual facts that may be called 'spiritual' are developed in both language, and in relationship to non-discursive features, too. There is considerably more learning, accompaniment and a way of entering into the subtle differences in situations of life and with other people as one 'learns' or comes to understand a practice and way of life in which 'spiritual perception' is developed.[44] And, of course, the study of spiritual and moral learning is merely an insight at this stage, not yet a theory.

Sona Farid-Arbab has made an admirable start in that regard, and explains well the relationship between conceptual capacity and moral and spiritual qualities, attitudes, and how an appreciation of the full palette of human experiences and achievements are part of that overall capacity which education should address.[45]

'Abdu'l-Bahá has said in explaining the Bahá'í teachings on this that the soul

> can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul.[46]

3. Learning to See and Know the World

McDowell characterizes perception as a capacity of knowledge, explaining it as one acquired by way of our 'second nature'. He writes, 'by ethical upbringing...resulting habits of thought and action are second nature'. 'This should defuse the fear of supernaturalism...This gives human reason enough of a foothold in the realm of [natural] law to satisfy any proper respect for modern natural science.'[47]

Our conceptual capacity is distinct from the natural in terms of a narrow view of naturalism, but McDowell's idea of a second-order dimension to the natural allows him to avoid what he characterizes as having to think of mind as 'supernatural'. The Bahá'í understanding of that capacity is that it is 'spiritual'. Bahá'ís believe that God,

> ...has chosen the reality of man and has honored it with intellect and wisdom, the two most luminous lights in either world. Through the agency of this great endowment, He has in every epoch cast on the mirror of creation new and wonderful configurations. If we look objectively upon the world of being, it will become apparent that from age to age, the temple of existence has continually been embellished with a fresh grace, and distinguished with an ever-varying splendor, deriving from wisdom and the power of thought.[48]

The difference between McDowell's and the Bahá'í approach is that Bahá'ís have a view of human reasoning and perception that relies on the rational soul. '[T]he power and attributes of man are human and hereditary in origin – outcomes of nature's processes – except the intellect, which is supernatural.'[49] Though we cannot understand the soul we can understand something of its consequences in the functioning of the various faculties.

> Consider the rational faculty with which God hath endowed the essence of man. Examine thine own self, and behold how thy motion and stillness, thy will and purpose, thy sight and hearing, thy sense of smell and power of speech, and whatever else is related to, or transcendeth, thy physical senses or spiritual perceptions, all proceed from, and owe their existence to, this same faculty. So closely are they related unto it, that if in less than the twinkling of an eye its relationship to the human body be severed, each and every one of these senses will cease immediately to exercise its function, and will be deprived of the power to manifest the evidences of its activity. It is indubitably clear and evident that each of these afore-mentioned instruments has depended, and will ever continue to depend, for its proper functioning on this rational faculty, which should be regarded as a sign of the revelation of Him Who is the sovereign Lord of all.[50]

The approach of McDowell in analyzing the difference between animal and human reasoning is persuasive, but he stops short of recognizing anything like a spiritual capacity of the human being. He brings our

conceptual capacity into what he argues is a coherent naturalism within the discourse space of science, as that is currently conceived, while at the same time stretching conventional naturalism as a worldview towards a more nuanced view able to accommodate the unique conceptual capacity that is human.

From a Bahá'í view that takes 'spiritual' as useful to mark the distinction between human conceptuality and the 'natural', McDowell's use of the concept of 'second nature' by way of our upbringing, culture and language may simply represent a difference of words, not of actual meanings. The Bahá'í conception of 'spiritual' is close in many ways to McDowell's use of the term 'second nature'. Bahá'ís understand the cultural and linguistic capacities of the human being as part of the spiritual reality and spiritual potential of human beings which, if misused, can bring the human mind to something less than animal 'rationality', but if developed well, can generate a heightened spirituality and morality that still is conceptual. Bahá'ís understand 'supernatural', sometimes used in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's language, as a contrast to the reductive sense of a 'naturalism' that discounts an idea of reality beyond the physical and the reductive understanding of a worldview that is exclusive naturalism. This idea of the 'spiritual' or 'supernatural' does not, then, leave those terms mysterious and other-worldly, beyond conceptual range. For Bahá'ís, it is the soul that provides the human being with the conceptual capacity to respond to the right kind of upbringing and education by way of language and culture. Though the soul itself cannot be understood, its effects and the faculties it powers can be. It is of a 'supernatural' character relative to the 'natural' features of animal and plant realities.

Further, a Bahá'í understanding of reality sees the physical as dependent on the spiritual, without undermining current scientific understanding of the physical forces at work by which so much physical phenomena has been usefully explained. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says 'the rational soul is the substance upon which the body depends'[51] – the spiritual is not dependent on the body. While that statement is, itself, not scientifically validated, neither is it contradicted by current scientific findings. The issue remains open for further exploration as the debate continues between a worldview of strict naturalism or one that accommodates explanations of higher human and spiritual realities from the 'top down' rather than from the 'bottom up' by way of reducing those 'higher' realities to material explanations, and which accommodate a view of 'extended reality' beyond the physical and natural in the ways Thomas Nagel explains.[52] The literature on this remains divisive and extensive, and arguments in that debate are left aside here.[53]

In referring to upbringing, culture and language, McDowell emphasizes language as central to our upbringing. As 'a central element in the normal maturation of human beings, we give pride of place to the learning of language'.

> In being initiated into a language, a human being is introduced into something that already embodies putatively rational linkages between concepts, putatively constitutive of the layout of the space of reasons...or, what comes to the same thing, living their lives in the world...the sort of language into which human beings are first initiated, serves as a repository of tradition, a story of historically

> accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what. The tradition is subject to reflective modification by each generation that inherits it. Indeed, a standing obligation to engage in critical reflection is itself part of the inheritance.[54]

What we understand of the conceptual nature of human faculties is that reason, or concepts, are developed by way of language learned within our shared human experiences, and language, as McDowell notes, is 'a repository of tradition'.[55]

Given the extent to which our growing into our conceptual capacity to see and know the world by way of the culture in which we are embedded – and over millennia culture has been shaped by religion – it is worth exercising our imagination to gain a better idea of how the world has been conceptualized and, therefore, perceived through different ages from antiquity to the 'Christian world' of the Middle Ages, and today's 'secular world'.

One of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century, W.V.O. Quine, makes a curious point about the conceptuality of what we 'secular moderns' perceive when he writes that as we take in a material world of objects, those 'physical objects are imported into the situation as convenient intermediaries...The myth of physical objects is epistemologically superior to most in that it has proved more efficacious than other myths as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience.'[56] He writes this to emphasize just how much experience itself has to be shaped by our conceptual capacity as there may be quite different ways of perceiving experience and making sense of it.

For example, in a different cultural 'world', that of an Indigenous hunter on the western plains before encountering a Eurocentric 'world', the hunter saw quite directly, not objects so much as a world of spirits that animated the natural world. The sky, the land, rivers and streams, trees and grassland, 'spoke' to him, and by doing so, did so with a richness of perceptual detail and acuity, shaped by his cosmology, or what are called pejoratively, 'myths' – that were likely self-correcting cosmologies that adjusted over generations in the collective tribal experiences. They enabled the hunter to guarantee a conceptually sound relationship to nature, to the transcendent and to his community.[57] His success in the hunt or in finding the right location to camp was assured by an exceptional acuity of perception by way of the natural world 'talking to him' by the smells and variations of wind, of bend of trees and grasses, that would allow effective tracking of the buffalo or elk. He learned by his culture and language how to perceive the world.

Or, as Charles Taylor notes, the world is seen differently by today's secular person with her or his disbelief in God – today's default position – than it was by the 14th century Christian or Muslim believer, whose default option is belief in God. It requires little imagination to recognize that those two 'worlds', 500 years apart, would be experienced and perceived differently, where relationships between people, the objects and tools of practical life would all be noticed and seen in very different ways.

4. Fallibility in the Individual Exercise of Conceptual Capacity

Today the conceptual demands on us are greater than ever as the complexity of contemporary life increases. The information explosion, the disruption of

routine ways of life and new and unexpected and virtual experiences upset our confidence in the facts we think we know about the world; and our ability to perceive the social and natural world can become confused and unsteady however much we need to rely on our perception of the world as a capacity for knowledge.

Joseph Heath has explained well the collapse of sound reasoning in public life currently in the social, economic, political and media environment. We skip too often the hard work that reasoning requires, taking account of the facts we think we know, the responsibility we should take for facts we think we know, or to take care with regard to our perception of the world.[58]

Heath acknowledges the extraordinary capacity of the human mind to develop our conceptual capacities for quick judgements and perceptual knowledge in a variety of circumstances, in the way we perceive social situations, patterns of phenomena in social reality, in our ability to make judgements about people and problems we encounter. This is a kind of reasoning that operates at the level of perception or very close to it. The problem, however, is that over-reliance on that ability can also generate mistakes, and go seriously wrong, especially in situations that require the kind of reasoning and deliberation that our ever-changing and complex experience in modern life give us.

The research that Heath documents falls under the 'dual process' theory of reasoning, illustrated in the distinction between 'fast' thinking and 'slow' thinking made popular by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman.[59] Simplifying that research, 'fast' thinking has to do with rapid response, quick pattern recognition, gut responses and intuition, the reliance on heuristics that become shortcuts in quick problem solving by pattern recognition, by analogies, by perceptual judgements of astonishing versatility. But here mistakes can quickly mount up when faced with problems and issues involving numbers, estimation, patterns that invite the bias of optimism, self-interest, confirmation bias, inappropriate framing or mistaken 'anchoring' effects. There is a tendency to overestimate the probability of suffering 'losses' against 'gains' in quick judgements about situations in front of us, and to overestimate errors connected to quick, but erroneous probability judgements, or reliance on facts that have been poorly and mistakenly justified in the past, that have become habitual and yet are not relevant to a current, similar-appearing 'fact'. Errors in misapplying, conflating and distorting facts overcome sound judgement.[60]

An 'age of information explosion' lends itself to such errors, and at the individual level, is a world that is fragmented and incoherent, resulting in perceptions and judgements wrongly linked to this fragment of a 'world' rather than to seeking coherence in the facts and explanations we have in mind. 'Fast' thinking contrasts with what is needed more than ever in society and in our lives as the world becomes more complex – a much 'slower' kind of thinking, deliberation and care in how we perceive the world. At the same time with respect to our complex social reality in the 21st century, we might ask how the development of spiritual perception might help us develop more open, positive, coherent and adaptive perception of complexity and the less tangible, but significant, human realities that are easily overlooked but which are crucial to cooperation and sociability.

To get to that, however, 'slow' reasoning and deliberation is a necessary learning stage from which, over time and with much practice, 'faster' perceptual judgements can be learned.

Heath summarizes this kind of slow reasoning. Genuine reasoning is not merely slow, but sequential, systematic, and linked with language that is explicit and reflective, involving close attention and working memory (where steps in problem solving are taken off-line, resolved, and then brought back into the sequential problem solving process). Such hard work at reasoning is usually relatively abstract and hypothetical. It requires a great deal of effort and attention to salient details, setting aside irrelevant details and the flux of so much that is available for perception but may only confuse the central problem. The ability to extract a particular issue or problem and read it in its abstracted form with the most important details, is an important part of such deliberate thinking, but patience is also required to determine which among successive efforts at resolving issues need to be re-examined and what forces and tendencies are at work in a given problem to ensure errors of salience are avoided. Explicit and reliable documenting of situations is always needed.

All this duplicates much of what we know about some aspects of scientific practice.

While this kind of reasoning seems daunting, it is much helped by what Heath describes as 'scaffolding'. That involves the institutionalization of the steps of reasoning across collective communities of researchers or planners or policy decision-makers, where decisions are slowed down by collective deliberation, and through the use of external aids of different kinds, among which are the use of reports, documents, language and writing of course: all ways of slowing down our thinking, giving time for reflection.

Of course, the institutionalization of processes of deliberation where a collective group brings its mutual capacities together, shares perceptions, reasons and the like, the power of 'slow' thinking becomes very quickly much greater than that of individual conceptual capacities, but with important learning at the individual level.

Science has developed in ways that provide the most exemplary illustration of collective conceptual capacity at work. It is now timely to consider science from a perspective that brings its practices and methods into the way we pursue practical reasoning, if not all the detail of the hard won theoretical and conceptual achievements of science.

By the way in which science is so important to Bahá'ís and because of the central role that science has in our age, it appears that 'Abdu'l-Bahá sees little value in maintaining a distinction or dichotomy between science and practical reason. McDowell, too, in enlarging the worldview of naturalism seems to suggest the value of setting aside such a sharp distinction between the scientific image of the world and our practical image of the world.

McDowell writes of how science has become a matter of common sense in the modern age:

> What is at work here is a conception of nature that can seem sheer common sense, though it was not always so; the conception I mean was made available only by a hard-won achievement of human thought at a specific time, the time of the rise of modern science.[61]

For science to inform our 'common sense' there needs to be a genuine understanding of the actual practice of science, and not merely a superficial acquaintance with a few random facts that headline some new scientific discovery.[62]

Facts and commitments are central to science. Explanations are based on facts: facts about laws and relationships, and facts that come by way of careful perception, instrumentation and measurement. Scientists commit to those facts by way of their research and proven, reliable methods of ensuring accurate findings. Taking responsibility for what we claim to know with regard to reality involves communities of scientists in systematic and constant exchange, giving and accepting reasons, explanations and new insights.

Philosophers and historians of science have generated helpful insights regarding the practice of science.[63] Close studies of the specific practices of scientists have contributed to a much sounder understanding of science as a practice than in Kant's time, or even 70 years ago when philosophy was concerned at overcoming the distinction philosophy saw between practical reason, the so-called 'space of reasons', and the nature of reasoning in science, 'the space of natural law'.

One summary of what we now know about science is to simply say that science involves 'inference to the best explanation' by which we understand explanations that take account of facts, including laws of causality or correlations relative to the phenomena under study, and where the 'best explanation' is one with the greatest breadth of coverage, where simplicity and explicitness of the explanation are good, and where its integration or combination with other explanations is higher than with competing explanations.[64]

Another summary of scientific method states that 'scientific knowledge differs from other kinds of knowledge, especially everyday knowledge, primarily by being more systematic', and includes systematic descriptions, explanations, predictions, justification of claims, connectedness (integration of explanations), and the ability of knowledge to generate new knowledge, and (where considerable care and attention are given to data and findings) avoiding errors as much as possible.[65]

It is not that science is alien to our everyday knowledge, but rather it is more systematic, detailed and explicit, relying on a sense of commitment to a thoroughness and care that is greater than in our practical reasoning. Science has perhaps been too long considered *sui generis* – distinct from practical reasoning, partly due to an emphasis on theory. However important theory is (even to know what to look for and perceive in reality), it is also practised in ways closer to the practical than previously understood.[66] Today practical life requires greater facility in applying the knowledge of science, and even more importantly something of the different methodologies of science, to the life of everyday reasoning and policy and planning at the community level, if society is to advance.

The methods of science vary from direct observation of phenomena to classification or taxonomy, from the use of basic mathematics to probability and statistical methods, and now advanced mathematical modelling, from experimental approaches and laboratory work to historical-genetic studies and engineering techniques, all carried out with careful attention to

documentation of data and refinements in measurement and instrumentation.[67] We have learned more, too, about heuristic approaches and implicit practices in science as well as the place of imprecise values like simplicity, even beauty, that influence the evaluation and selection of theory and contribute to the advance of scientific research programmes.[68] To think that freedom and spontaneity of mind is not at work in science is to discount the imagination and the practical deliberations that select the focus of scientific research programmes.

Conclusion

To this point we have developed a view of the conceptual nature of the human being that understands our experience by way of an evolving view of a world that we already have in mind with new facts and perceptions giving us reasons to adjust that view. We have also come to understand our perception of reality as one permeated by the concepts we have of the world. We learn to perceive by way of our concepts.

To manage with a measure of reason and reliability in our interactions with others, and in our participation in the decisions and directions of our collective lives together in communities, to live well and flourish as a society, we have to rely on facts we know to be true, not mere fancy or facts without warrant, and we have to trust that we are perceiving the world accurately.

How do we know when a fact is true? And how can we be sure our perception of the world gives us genuine knowledge about our reality, and the situations and the people that we encounter? These are important questions at a time when 'false facts', virtual and fabricated realities, and a proliferation of 'theories' and contradictory claims regarding the world as it is, and as it should be, obscure the sense and shape of the world we try to come to know.

The exercise of our collective conceptual capacity is a way towards overcoming sources of error. In its astonishing versatility and power to know and respond to the world, its development and refinement are dependent on the collective exercise of our human conceptual capacities, in families, communities, in our work places and institutions, and in the wider public life. It is in our upbringing and connection to culture and language that we learn to use that capacity in our understanding and engagement with the world.

Science and religion are two of the more important collective institutions in civilization that can educate and help discipline our exercise of conceptual capacity – though to see their relevance requires a sound understanding of the actual practice of science, and a conception of religion that departs from conventional ways in which religion is understood.[69] In that respect, the Bahá'í view of religion is worth considering.

Philosophy has long characterized modernity as an age of scepticism, and even suspicion,[70] especially so with respect to religion. The university and public intellectual life continues to be roiled by doubts regarding rational views of human affairs that make claims to objective truth. Sceptical arguments for relativism, subjectivism and the impossibility of escaping particular cultural bias undermine confidence in any claims to objective truth; how much more is religion considered doubtful. At the same time,

modernity has seen the dissolution of social bonds as religion and tradition fell away from their role in upholding solidarity. Less noticed has been the attendant collapse of that collective conceptual capacity that was, as problematic as it may have been, conveyed within the culture, language and norms of religion and tradition which served as a foundation for conceptual engagement with society in a way that was coherent and consistent, if also rigid, authoritarian and inequitable.[71]

We know we have learned to see a table and the physical world of objects and colours, and the like, but we also learn to perceive others – what they say, how they look, behave, gesture and act – and we learn to perceive situations and interactions among people in discriminating ways. And we can also learn to see interactions that are cooperative, kind, uplifting, generous – all the norms that religion and spirituality should uphold.

There is a place, then, for giving attention to the development of a spiritual conceptuality that can inform our perception in ways that are spiritual where we learn to see what is spiritual in the interactions, episodes and situations of our lives.

McDowell writes that our learning to perceive kindliness and moral situations is not all that dissimilar to some of the ways Aristotle describes the process of learning moral sensitivity and ethical responsiveness. Aristotle wrote about the importance of our upbringing and accompaniment by others – friendship was a key concept of Aristotle – in our learning to 'see' the world and its ethical features and qualities.[72] Distinguishing our modern era from antiquity, McDowell notes – giving modernity its most ideal construction – that today's world serves to develop a critical and reflective individuality that contrasts positively with the fixed individuality of previous ages that was tied to social roles and conventional norms in stable and enduring societies.[73] However, the costs due to the superficiality, depravity, dysfunctional family and community lives, and incoherence and fragmentation of much of modern life damages efforts to learn a genuine moral and spiritual language, and a conceptual grasp of the world that is able to influence our perception. The importance of learning about how we can perceive (and then act) on ways of interacting with others that builds human solidarity, spiritual values, and establishes collective norms that have excellence and nobility in view is a role for religion, if conceived appropriately.

In the terms by which the Bahá'í Faith understands religion, there is much that recommends study of its practices and tenets as a collective institution, working with science to advance the refinement and development of our conceptual capacity. For millennia religion served as an important institution that evolved hand in hand with human conceptual capacity as Robert Bellah and others have argued.[74] Today, science is playing a crucial role in advancing our conceptual acuity, but religion can also play an important role.

In the Bahá'í Faith the methods of science and sound reasoning are being brought into its community practice. Rather than a system of rites, 'blind faith', or mystery and superstition, this is what religion should be, by our reading of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who often repeated that 'religion must be in conformity with science and reason', that 'religion must stand the analysis of reason', and that 'religion is essentially reality and pure reason'.[75]

Just how much reason plays a role in the Bahá'í Faith would require several books to adequately document. Central to the life of the Bahá'í community is its reliance on institutional and community processes in which collective discussion, conversation and exchange of understanding serve to advance the reasoning which underlies systematic decisions as plans are pursued across the community. Bahá'ís call this process 'consultation': a diverse group of people reflects and discusses issues together, sharing different perspectives, and contributing what they feel is the way to resolve an issue, giving respect and careful attention to each person's views. The value of systematic approaches embedded in institutions where explicit records and an attention to learning is valued, are of importance. This attention to collective institutional processes and continued learning are embraced as a matter of religious conviction.

The Bahá'í community, in its educational processes and action plans, understands well the relationship between an evolving conceptual framework shared at the collective level of the community. By way of study, reflection, action and consultation based on collective experience concepts and plans are adjusted in the light of experience. Perception and responses to social situations, to moral and spiritual situations are a matter for learning that aims to be explicit, with further reflections and actions advancing learning processes. Efforts to learn systematically to 'read' (or perceive) society, to understand the social forces at work, to learn in practical and specific ways what spiritual perceptions and genuine actions to transform society are reliable, and which are not, also brings the exercise and learning about how to reason together into the repertoire of personal conceptual capacities.

The process of learning itself, as in science, is seen as a practice that evolves in the culture, the community and the institutions. Individual learning also evolves through practice and action, reflection, study and further collective consultation. In all of this, facts and responsibility to those facts are important in learning new ways of perceiving social situations, and of perceiving each other, with a bias to seeing positive, rather than negative, qualities. This is taken as a genuine kind of learning that is as central as any other kind of learning. This effort to bring the conceptual into community life by way of a systematic and collective process is needed if the capacity for the conceptual that is so central to human nature is to engage the social and the spiritual as much as the material – if mind is to come to know the world in all its heterogeneity, material and spiritual, in an objective way by which action can then transform the world.

Of course, we need to know how best to distinguish and draw on concepts that are genuinely spiritual from those that are superstitious, entirely other-worldly, merely imagination gone sideways, or illusions that are nothing more than self-centred dreams. But with science as a guide to setting aside spiritual claims that contradict science, and by the use of collective reasoning and deliberation, the giving and taking of reasons with others about what spiritual reality may involve, a way forward becomes clear.

The Importance of Spiritual Language

In all of this, far and away the most important factor is having a language that is able to inform how we take in and see the world.

The greatest novelists and writers have gifts not only of language but also of observation. As a great writer has said, it is the 'observational ability', 'the God-given attitude of perception and articulacy' that takes good writers and lifts them to a higher plane. It is their ability not just to use language well but to observe and perceive the world, people, human situations, that helps the rest of us see the world in different ways.[76] The non-discursive arts, visual and musical also help us to see the world in different ways.

Religion has long generated the arts and shaped the language of cultures. It can again, in a new form and expression appropriate to an age in which humanity is now coming to know itself in all its diversity of cultures, an age too, of science and technology. The language of the Bahá'í revelation seems to offer that measure of spirituality and reason, sound counsel and elevated ideals, in a language that marries concept with action, the transcendent with the practical. And Bahá'u'lláh, the founder-prophet of the Bahá'í Faith, recognized that, although words alone are not enough – 'How great the multitude of truths which the garment of words can never contain'[77] – religion has always had language, the Word of God, at the centre of its approach to the education of humanity.

Genuine religious language is about unity, love and understanding, and moral qualities, and living a life that moves a person closer to God. Having drawn the linkage between language and conceptual capacities, more precisely between language and perception, it is surely neither a great leap of faith nor of argument to make the claim that the sort of language we try our best to learn from, to draw on, to live with and share with others, is a language that deals with those features of the world that guide our perceptual attention to see the world in the light of qualities of love, mutual understanding, care, kindness and justice. In doing so we might learn to see with our 'own eyes and not through the eyes of others', and that 'justice is My [God's] gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes'.[78]

The faculty of perception can operate not merely with concepts related to the material realm of our existence, not merely within a constrained, secular 'space of reasons' but within an expanded 'space of reasons' that accommodates spiritual reality. We are always vulnerable to our own fallibility and limited capacity, and our fallibility in spiritual perception is at least as great as our general fallibility, but spiritual perception includes ways of correcting that kind of perception just as we rely on our perception of the material world as a self-correcting capacity.

In considering the role of science and religion as institutions that pursue the collective exercise of our conceptual capacities, it is worth recalling how attentive science has always been to its receptivity to the deliverances of experience of the natural world. Consider the care with which data and findings are documented, the care with which instrumentation and measurement rest on a deliberation of inferences related to facts about how human perception is augmented by way of appropriate instruments that help to take away the veils of more limited perception. An important advance in our understanding of scientific practice comes from Thomas Kuhn's understanding of the apprenticeship of young scientists as a process of learning how to actually see natural phenomena directly by way of their introduction into scientific practice and by way of instruments in new ways.[79] One might

illustrate, thus: 'Where I once saw the moon as a planet, I now see the moon as a satellite of the earth', or 'I once saw simply a mess through the microscope, but now I see bacteria of definite type and form.'

It is interesting to consider a comment of Francis Bacon, a key figure in the revolution that launched modern science. He stressed the actual perception of the world as having to be different.

> But by far the greatest hindrance and aberration of the human understanding proceeds from the dullness, incompetency, and deceptions of the senses; in that things which strike the sense outweigh things which do not immediately strike it, though they be more important. Hence it is that speculation commonly ceases where sight ceases; insomuch that of things invisible there is little or no observation.[80]

With respect to spiritual perception, 'Abdu'l-Bahá comments,

> The bestowals of God which are manifest in all phenomenal life are sometimes hidden by intervening veils of mental and mortal vision which render man spiritually blind and incapable, but when these scales are removed and the veils rent asunder, then the great signs of God will become visible, and he will witness eternal light filling the world.[81]

A passage from a Bahá'í learning document notes the importance of spiritual perception:

> Early adolescence is a period of life during which we greatly enhance our capacity to go beyond outer appearances and seek a deeper understanding of what we witness and what we experience. This implies that junior youth are in need of spiritual perception and should be assisted to recognize spiritual forces, to see the reality of every condition and to identify relevant spiritual principles.[82]

'Abdu'l-Bahá writes, 'Let them open wide their eyes and uncover the inner realities of all things..while man possesses powers in common with the animal he is distinguished from the animal by intellectual attainment, spiritual perception, the acquisition of virtues, capacity to receive the bestowals of Divinity, lordly bounty and emanations of heavenly mercy.'[83]

> Our spiritual perception, our inward sight must be opened, so that we can see the signs and traces of God's spirit in everything. Everything can reflect to us the light of the Spirit.[84]

Though the spirit is reflected 'in everything', we think of spiritual perception as most significant in how we perceive the social world. McDowell, in embracing a naturalism that includes our 'second nature', is concerned that his understanding does not imply a re-enchantment of nature, but is merely a way 'of bringing meaning back into the picture when we consider human interactions'.[85] He does not envisage a view of the world where 'the movement of the planets, or the fall of a sparrow, is rightly approached in the sort of way we approach a text or an utterance of some other kind of

[human] action'.[86] But, from a spiritual angle, need we be so closed to a spiritual view of nature, too, now when it may be more necessary than ever? Bahá'u'lláh writes about nature:

> Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator. Its manifestations are diversified by varying causes, and in this diversity there are signs for men of discernment. Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world. ... It is endowed with a power whose reality men of learning fail to grasp. Indeed a man of insight can perceive naught therein save the effulgent splendour of Our Name, the Creator. Say: This is an existence which knoweth no decay, and Nature itself is lost in bewilderment before its revelations, its compelling evidences and its effulgent glory which have encompassed the universe.[87]

Even better if we should strive to see the 'extended reality' of the world as God sees it, 'Thy hearing is My hearing, hear thou therewith. Thy sight is My sight, do thou see therewith...'[88] To do that, we have to keep in mind a world that is always, for human beings, beyond the immediately perceptible, while yet paying close attention to learning to see what is immediately there, in front of us – in both the natural world and the social world.

> '...by the light of the name of the All-Seeing God, make your escape from the darkness that surroundeth you. Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self.'[89]

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Endnotes

1. Bahá'í readers may find it helpful to know that this essay was inspired by the learning objectives of Book Five of the Ruhi Institute publication series, though this essay is not by any means an explanation of the idea of 'spiritual perception' or any other concept in that Book. Evidence for the soundness of the idea of 'spiritual perception' is, however, abundantly validated in practice judging by conversations the author has had with young people who have learned from Book Five and its related practices in concert with others. For an excellent treatment of the framework of concepts contributing to that Book, see Sona Farid-Arbab, *Moral Empowerment – In Quest of a Pedagogy*, Wilmette, Ill: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2016.

2. 'Practical reason' is not to be confused with 'instrumental reason'. 'Practical' refers to the problems and challenges we face in the course of our lives, alone and with others, distinct from 'theoretical' or 'purely abstract'.

3. The distinction has some value in classifying curriculum in formal education. See Farid-Arbab, *Moral Empowerment* 293–94, Ch. 9, 'Pedagogical Choices'.

4. John McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994 (1996 edn.).

5. Willem deVries, 'Wilfrid Sellars' in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/sellars/, Winter 2016 Edition.

6. Charles Larmore, *The Practices of the Self*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, 97.

7. Jürgen Habermas addressed the distinction between the 'space of natural law' and the 'space of reasons' by introducing a classification of reason, distinguishing 'instrumental reason' of science from 'communicative reason' aimed at reaching intersubjective agreement. Habermas notes the difference between cause and reason with cause, the linchpin of scientific conceptuality, and reasons central to intersubjective deliberation and coming to agreements. See Martin Jay, *Reason After Its Eclipse*, Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016, 150. And Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, *Volume 1,* Boston: Beacon Press, 1984 (English translation). Original German edition published in 1981.

8. deVries, Willem, 'Wilfrid Sellars' in Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/sellars/, Winter 2016 Edition.

9. The main reference books here are McDowell, *Mind and World*, and John McDowell, *Perception as a Capacity for Knowledge*, Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 2011.

10. A brief introduction to the history of how we have understood human reasoning, is the first chapter of Jay, *Reason After Its Eclipse*. The most important rationalists were Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza, and the empiricists of note were Francis Bacon, John Locke and David Hume.

11. Cited by McDowell, *Mind and World*, 5.

12. It is of interest that 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Head of the worldwide Bahá'í community from 1892 to 1921) comments on how we understand the abstract, or concept, by way of the concrete; and he makes the point, as cited further on in this essay how our understanding of the world (that it is round, that is far more than merely what is available to our senses, and so forth) is abstract or conceptual.

13. For the best explanation of how human action always operates under concepts, or 'under a description' to distinguish it from unintentional activity, see Donald Davidson, *Truth, Language and History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Actions depend on intentions that, like beliefs, desires, facts, and the like, are amenable to propositional form, noting that the intention is propositional but the action may be non-discursive (see next note). McDowell sees perception and action as 'entry' and 'exit' in our engagement with the world, and both are conceptual, but we have no space here for that discussion.

14. This 'definition' makes language to be the conceptual vehicle of thought, speech and action, where it quite rightly plays the central role, but I don't discount the non-discursive in our conceptuality. It can be demonstrated that the non-discursive operates structurally through our learning paradigmatic situations in ways similar to language learning by way of our learning concept or universals along with complex syntactical 'rules' that are, themselves, often non-discursive even with respect to language use (see Wittgenstein). That case can be made, but it is lengthy, so is set aside here.

15. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre, 2014, 213–219. See McDowell's discussion of human rationality's contrast with animals', *Mind and World*, especially 114–119.

16. That phrase is used by Robert Brandom, a colleague of McDowell, in *Articulating Reasons*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000.

17. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 213–219.

18. *ibid* 216.

19. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978, 194.

20. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982, 258.

21. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 213–219.

22. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 360.

23. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 213–219.

24. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 29.

25. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1954, 317. There is an important and different sense, as Sona Farid-Arbab has explained in *Moral Empowerment* 75 that understanding is also infinite. Bahá'u'lláh refers to the 'limitless...favors...conferred upon man' with the 'gift of understanding' (*Gleanings* 194), but that may mean in terms of the range of knowledge accessible to mind, yet still understood within the conceptions of the mind. The humility of human reason in this passage reflects an important spirit in modern philosophy which also emphasizes the finitude and limitations of even the kind of questions we can ask with language. See the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Richard Rorty and John Dewey especially. The finitude of human intelligence was a key feature of John Dewey's work throughout his thirty volumes of work.

26. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 125.

27. This relates to Habermas' condition of truthfulness or sincerity in communicative reasoning as he develops it, a criteria that is added to the criterion of truth relative to the 'object world'. Time would not allow translating McDowell's approach into Habermas' 'minimal naturalism', but it would be a fascinating project.

28. For a way of applying Bahá'í and philosophic insights to education and empowerment, see Farid-Arbab, *Moral Empowerment*.

29. We use 'facts' here in the manner of Robert Brandom, in their propositional sense and with reference to states of affairs, and also in a way that includes the idea of intentionality and commitment of the subject who claims to know a fact. See Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons – An Introduction to Inferentialism*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000. The idea of knowledge as a coherent, inferentially related set of facts about the world is developed by Brandom in *Articulating Reasons*.
    For a general article on facts see Kevin Mulligan and Fabrice Correia, 'Facts', in Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2017, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/facts/.

30. 'Nouns, names, and predicates may refer to...one or more things, but they cannot, by themselves, represent facts or states of affairs. Only sentences can do this...' Davidson, *Truth, Language and History* 130. And also from Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, and, 'Facts, Norms, and Normative Facts: A Reply to Habermas', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 8(3), 2000, 356–374.

31. Again truthfulness, or sincerity, is an additional criterion of reason for Jürgen Habermas. See, for example, Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume Two: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1987, 27. In this essay there is no discussion of 'false consciousness' and other psychological issues, important as they are.

32. McDowell, *Perception as a Capacity for Knowledge*.

33. Psychologist Timothy Wilson estimates that the brain is inundated with '11 million discrete bits of information per second, of which no more than 40 can be consciously processed', cited by Joseph Heath, *Enlightenment 2.0 – Restoring Sanity to Our Politics, Our Economy and Our Live*s, Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014, 73.

34. Honneth, Axel, 'Between Hermeneutics and Hegelianism – John McDowell and the Challenge of Moral Realism', in Smith, Nicholas H., *Reading McDowell on Mind and World*, Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2002, 246.

35. Farid-Arbab, *Moral Empowerment*, 140–150 and 235–8.

36. Farid-Arbab, *Moral Empowerment* 309, citing McDowell from 'Virtues and Reason', in R. Crisp and M. Slote (eds.), *Virtue Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, 142.

37. Or, as Aristotle said, by friendship we learn wisdom and virtue.

38. Space prevents a summary of McDowell's explanation of the action side, echoing the perception side, in a similarly conceptual manner with commitments and facts, and where the conceptual is inseparable from action. *Lecture V, Mind and World*.

39. Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*, New York: HarperCollins, 1994, 267–268. Though by other estimates, since a six year old has a vocabulary of 13,000 words, my calculation is that a new word is learned every 45 minutes from two to six years of age. See Davidson, *Truth, Language, and History* 13. Davidson also refers to John L. Locke, *The Child's Path to Spoken Language*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993.

40. Davidson, *Truth* 135, citing the research of Jenny R. Saffran, Richard N. Aslin and Elissa L. Newport, 'Statistical Learning by 8-month-old Infants', *Science*, 274, 13 December 1996, 1926–8.

41. Davidson, *Truth*, 135.

42. See Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990. Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 'I now want to argue that emotions...share with perception the feature that they must be in some sense essentially perspectival.' '...paradigm scenarios, in setting up our emotional repertoire, quite literally provide the meaning of our emotions...[at] the axiological level of reality that they pick out' – de Sousa, *Rationality* 156 and 189. And, 'for Descartes, emotions are a species of perception: they are "perceptions...of the soul which we relate specially to it, and which are caused, maintained, and fortified by some movement of the spirits"' – cited in de Sousa, *Rationality* 28. These studies of emotional responses as conceptual in nature are, however, also entangled with 'fast' pattern recognition and deep-seated and learned responses, and often result in erroneous judgement errors that are discussed near this essay's end.

43. de Sousa, *Rationality*, already cited, and Nussbaum, *Upheavals*, already cited.

44. I have written of emotions here as there is an existing and well-argued literature on the rationality of emotions. 'Emotions' is a term which covers a wide range of heterogenous passions, attitudes, behaviours, impulses and responses, and the treatment here is inadequate as a sufficient philosophical analysis, but by the Bahá'í terms with which spirituality is understood, there is important work to be done in this area in the years ahead.

45. See Farid-Arbab, *Moral Empowerment*.

46. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 217.

47. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 84.

48. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilization*, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1957, 1.

49. 'Supernatural' is taken to mean beyond the mineral, plant and animal reality. 'Abdu'l-Bahá *Promulgation,* 49.

50. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, 164.

51. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, Section 66, para. 4.

52. Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, and see a good summary of the meaning of 'extended reality' in Farzam Arbab, 'An Inquiry into the Harmony of Science and Religion' in Geoffrey Cameron and Benjamin Schewel (eds.), *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition*, Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018, 131–162.

53. The failure of that dominant conception to explain by reducing all phenomenon to physical, chemical and sometimes biological explanations, with Daniel Dennett among the most articulate in that regard, is argued extensively by those who are not themselves 'religious' philosophers, or idealists like John Haldane or Alvin Plantinga, but by more 'secular' philosophers like Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, or Hilary Putnam and others whose several publications on multiple realization offer contrasts with a strict naturalism. And there are more popular recent publications, for example, Gabriel Markus, *I Am Not a Brain*, Cambridge: The Polity Press, 2017.

54. McDowell, *Mind and World* 125–6. And McDowell cites Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose book *Truth and Method* has as its principal theme the idea that the concept of tradition is central to understanding. As Gadamer claims, 'man's relation to the world is absolutely and fundamentally verbal in nature', cited by McDowell in *Reading McDowell*, 297, from Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, rev. trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshal, New York: Crossroad, 1992, 475–476.

55. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, very much in keeping with explanations in philosophy categorizes 'sources of knowledge' or 'criteria of knowledge' as (1) sensible, (2) rational, (3) traditional (or conventional)

and (4) inspirational (intuitive). 'Abdu'l-Bahá does that to contrast those sources that demonstrate human fallibility, not to introduce the scepticism that has characterized philosophy, but to contrast those fallible sources of knowledge with the only infallible one, 'the Holy Spirit'. He also notes, in one of the explanations on this subject, that by using more than one of those four criteria one's judgement is improved.

56. W. V. O. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, New York: Harper and Row, 1963 edn., 44.

57 For a well-supported argument that specific cognitive advances go hand in hand with the evolution of myth and religion, see Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, Cambridge, Mass.: Bellknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. And for the relationship of reason to perception of justice, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.

58. Heath, *Englightenment, 2.0*.

59. There is a large body of research on this issue but Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky are the headliners, and Kahneman's book the central reference, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2011.

60. Some of that ability to think 'fast' is the result of slow physiological evolutionary developments over aeons, but much is due to cultural evolution that has become a part of early childhood patterns of upbringing, often associated with language development, and that have become a part of human culture over successive millennia of human history; and a lot of that ability regarding pattern recognition and quick problem solving is developed within the life of an individual, especially during the early years, and also by developing particular expertise through hours and hours of practice and work in specific fields of human endeavour.

61. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 70.

62. Few philosophers have been as concerned about science education for the public and its relationship to 'common sense' as John Dewey.

63. For an accurate summary of this, see Arbab, 'An Inquiry into the Harmony of Science and Religion' in Cameron and Schewel (eds.), *Religion and Public Discourse,* 131–162.

64. Alexander Bird, *Philosophy of Science*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998; and see Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Theory and Reality*.

65. Citing Hoyningen-Huene in Hanne Andersen and Brian Hepburn, 'Scientific Method', in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/scientific-method/. The Hoyningnen-Huene quote is from that article in 'The Conclusion'.

66. As Einstein famously said, to paraphrase, 'theory enables us to know what to look for in reality.'

67. Ian Hacking, 'Finding Out: Prolegomena to a Theory of Truthfulness and Reasoning in the Sciences', keynote address, Canadian Philosophical Association, Saskatoon, 28 May 2007.

68. Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Theory and Reality*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003, Ch. 14.

69. For an exploration of ways of understanding religion that depart from the conventional, in search of more appropriate and modern concepts see Benjamin Schewel, *Seven Ways of Looking at Religion*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017.

70. The 'masters of suspicion' being Freud, Marx, Feuerbach and Nietzsche. Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 367–8.

71. See MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?* for a description of the tight relationship between the nature of reasoning and the culture in which conceptual capacities are embedded, with particular attention to the relationship between justice and reason.

72. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 84.

73. McDowell, John, 'Responses' in Smith, Nicholas H.(ed.), *Reading McDowell*, 296, 297.

74. On the relationship of religion to our conceptual capacity, see Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*.

75. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 107.

76. In an article about Martin Amis by Nathaniel Rich, 'Downhill Racing', *The New York Review of Books*, September 27, 2018, 40–42.
77. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, 176.
78. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970 edn., 4.
79. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962, 110–134.
80. Sir Francis Bacon, from Aphorism 50, *Novum Organum, Book I* (1620). Collected in James Spedding (ed.), *The Works of Francis Bacon*, Vol. 4, 1858, 58.
81. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 90.
82. *Releasing the Powers of Junior Youth*, Book 5 of the Ruhi Institute, Prepublication Version 6.3.1.PP, Cali, Colombia: Ruhi Foundation, 29 April 2009, Unit 3, 8.
83. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in Ruhi Institute Book 5, *Releasing,* Unit 3, 8.
84. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in Ruhi Institute Book 5, *Releasing,* Unit 3, 9.
85. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 72.
86. *Ibid.*
87. Bahá'u'lláh, 'Lawh-i-Hikmat', *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas*, Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978, 142.
88. Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, 4.
89. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, 94.