

Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet on the Simple Reality (Lawḥ-i-Basítu'l-Ḥaqíqih): An Introductory Analysis

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Bahá'u'lláh revealed the Lawḥ-i-Basítu'l-Ḥaqíqih or the Tablet on the Simple Reality, as Vahid Rafati has noted, sometime during the 'Akká period¹ in response to a request of an inquirer, addressed as Ḥusayn, for an elucidation of a metaphysical dictum of the Persian philosopher Mullá Ṣadrá (1571-1636): “the Simple Reality is all things.”² This inquirer had ventured to ask Bahá'u'lláh on behalf of one of the disciples of the then-contemporary philosopher Hádí Sabzivárí, whom Bahá'u'lláh refers to as “the Philosopher of Sabzivár” in the latter half of the Tablet.³

In the context of Mullá Ṣadrá's work, the Simple Reality refers to God, for the term “simple” or *basít* is here used in the technical, philosophical meaning of “not composed of parts” or incomposite, which explains its being rendered as “uncompounded” in previous Bahá'í literature. Theistic philosophers throughout history have long argued for the absolute unity and incomposite nature of God as the supreme reality on which all other things depend. Since whatever is composed of parts depends upon those parts in order to exist, and upon some cause to make those parts cohere, God, who is utterly independent in His existence, must be an immaterial, incomposite existent. Aristotle (384-322 BC) in the classical period of Greek philosophy, and Plotinus (204/5-270) in the late antique expression of Platonism—as well as Maimonides (1138-1204), St. Thomas (1225-1274), and Avicenna (980-1037) within the philosophical schools of Judaism, Catholicism, and Islam respectively—all accordingly emphasized simplicity as one of the cardinal attributes of that ultimate and divine reality on which all others depend.⁴ Plotinus, in particular, obviously inspired Mullá Ṣadrá phrasing,⁵ even while Avicenna, a fellow Muslim, provided many elements of the conceptual and terminological apparatus Mullá Ṣadrá used to frame

¹ Dr. Rafati has determined that Tablet must have been revealed sometime before July of 1881 (28), while Dr. Momen, on the basis of an account from Ustád 'Alí Akbar Banná , has noted that it must have been even before 1878 (211).

² Mullá Ṣadrá discusses this in his work titled *al-Hikmatu'l-Muta'álíyyih fi'l-Asfári'l-'Aqlíyyati'l-Arba'ih*, in the first *safar*, second *juz'*, and thirty-eighth *faṣl*. In a work translated by James Morris, *The Wisdom of the Throne (al-Hikmatu'l-'Arshíyyah)*, the dictum may be found in part 1, section 2 (page 98).

³ Rafati, 29.

⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 12, chapter 7; Plotinus, *Enneads*, ennead 5, chapter 2, article 1; Avicenna, *Dāniṣhnámih*, “Metaphysics,” chapter 21; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, “Prima Pars,” question 3; Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Book 1, chapters 51, 53, 57.

⁵ In the *Enneads*, 5.2.1, Plotinus states that the One—the ultimate and simple principle from which all else proceeds—is all things, but not any one of them.

his own philosophy. God is thus the “Simple Reality,” and it is with that general understanding that Mullá Şadrá used the expression in his own philosophy. To this day, *simplicity* is often regarded as an essential attribute of God by theologians in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, and is considered an irreformable teaching in the Catholic Church.

Beyond theistic philosophers, Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and the Báb Themselves affirmed divine simplicity in Their writings. Bahá’u’lláh, for example, states that God “hath, throughout eternity, been one in His Essence, one in His attributes, one in His works.”⁶ In another place, He affirms that God’s unity precludes His having discrete attributes, distinct from His essence, that could act as parts within Him: “the multiplicity of various names and attributes shall never be joined unto His essence, for His attributes are verily His essence itself.”⁷ Similarly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes that the Divine reality “admits of no division, for division and multiplicity are among the characteristics of created and hence contingent things, and not accidents impinging upon the Necessary Being.”⁸ Likewise, the Báb states that “the Eternal Essence hath no peer, and within Him there are no discrete attributes or distinct aspects, for otherwise a condition of having parts, of cohesion of different elements, of alteration, and of division would be necessitated.”⁹

Consequently, the Simple Reality, both for philosophers of the past and for the Central Figures Themselves, describes the reality of God. As such, Mullá Şadrá’s dictum—“the Simple Reality is all things”—initially seems to assert that God, as the Simple Reality, is one with, or identical to, the things of the created world; in other words, it seems to support pantheism or monism. In the course of the Tablet, however, Bahá’u’lláh interprets the statement in a way that precludes any pantheistic reading. To do so, He provides one central and three auxiliary interpretations, according to which Mullá Şadrá’s dictum does not in fact deny that God is intrinsically distinct from the realm of His creation. God’s transcendence is a matter Bahá’u’lláh continually emphasized throughout His Writings, and it is accordingly an important feature of Bahá’í theology. In the course of the Tablet Bahá’u’lláh thus states decisively that “God Himself hath ever been, and shall forever remain, sanctified from ascent, descent, and limitation, connection to, and association with all other things. All other things, in contrast, abide in the sphere of their specific limitations.”

⁶ *Gleanings*, 193.

⁷ *Má’idiy-i-Ásmání*, 4: 321.

⁸ *Some Answered Questions*, 127.

⁹ “Tawqí‘-i-Ĥadrat-i-Rabb-i-A‘lá,” 15.

In order to understand Bahá'u'lláh's explanations fully, however, we must first consider the philosophical background of Mullá Şadrá's dictum itself—namely, its identification of God as the Simple Reality, some important implications of divine simplicity, and what it has entailed for philosophers in the tradition of classical theism and for Bahá'u'lláh Himself. In the context of the Islamic intellectual world and of Mullá Şadrá's work, these critical implications of divine simplicity may be discerned by investigating the metaphysical system of the preeminent 11th century Muslim philosopher Avicenna, who influenced all subsequent philosophers in the Islamic world, as well as the scholastic tradition in Europe, and whose framing of philosophical discourse especially influenced thinkers in the Shí'ih community such as Mullá Şadrá. We will thus consider how Avicenna argues for and explains divine simplicity to see how Mullá Şadrá himself conceived of it, and then analyze Bahá'u'lláh's exegesis of the dictum in light of this background.

Avicenna argued that God is the ultimate reality, which exists necessarily of itself, in a self-subsistent way, without dependence on any cause. God is thus “the Necessarily Existent” or *Vájibu'l-Vujúd*—a term Bahá'u'lláh uses in the Tablet and which is employed routinely by Mullá Şadrá. Specifically, Avicenna argued that in God, who is absolute unity, there is no distinction even between essence and existence, and that He is thus His own existence and cannot *not* exist. He exists, therefore, necessarily and is simple in the most fundamental way possible. Central to Avicenna's argument for, and conception of, God is accordingly the basic distinction to be made between *essence* on the one hand and *existence* on the other. For Avicenna, the essence of a thing is that reality which is particular to it, and by virtue of which it is *what* it is. It is this essence of a thing that is conveyed by its definition, which for Avicenna would describe something as belonging to a particular genus and a species within that genus. For example, the essence of a triangle is to be a plane figure (its genus) of three sides (its species). The existence of a thing, conversely, is not what it is, but rather the fact *that* it is, the fact that its essence has been instantiated into actual being, or joined to an act of existence as received by an external cause.

It is through this distinction of essence and existence that Avicenna described the condition of contingent beings. A contingent being is something that, when considered in itself, can either exist or not exist. For it to exist in actuality, it must derive its existence from a cause. For Avicenna, any contingent being thus depends on (is *contingent* on) a cause to exist in actuality because it does not have existence in itself—its own essence is not its existence—and it thus must rely on something additional to itself in order to receive existence and to be actually, and not merely

possibly, existent. Similarly, a contingent being continues to depend on a cause in order to be sustained in existence, such as when something continues to exist through the cohesion of its parts, or the continuing activity of an effective agent, such as when flame emanates heat or a foundation supports the integrity of a house. In other words, a contingent being is a created thing, and a composite of essence and existence, which function as metaphysical “parts.”

Avicenna’s argument for the existence of God proceeds from the premise that any contingent being requires a cause to exist, and concludes that the causal sequence of contingent beings must itself terminate in a cause that is not contingently existent. The sequence of causes therefore terminates in something that is necessarily existent in itself—a cause in which there is no distinction between essence and existence, which thus has no need to derive its existence from another. For Avicenna, this simple and necessarily existent reality is none other than God Himself. God does not need to receive His existence from anything else, because He of Himself, in His own essence, is the fullness of His existence in perfect unity and simplicity.

What is vital here is that, under Avicenna’s analysis, no contingent being is wholly simple, because every contingent being is a composite of essence and existence. God alone, in being His existence itself, does not have an essence distinct from His existence; His essence simply is His existence, and as such He is self-subsistent and therefore independent of all other reality, while also being its source. After demonstrating the reality of the Necessarily Existent in the metaphysical portion of his philosophical compendium *ash-Shifá*, Avicenna proceeds to deduce the other attributes of the Necessarily Existent, and concludes that, in addition to His absolute simplicity, God must be single and unique, eternal, perfect, wholly good, and even immaterial—and thus of the nature of supreme intellect. Relevant to our discussion here is that this is the basic idea of God and His simplicity that was generally operative for Mullá Šadrá when he developed his own philosophical system, since he accepts that God alone is the Necessarily Existent. This conception of God is thus relevant to our understanding of what Bahá’u’lláh means when He affirms God’s necessity and simplicity in The Tablet of the Simple Reality.

Significantly, in accordance with divine simplicity, Avicenna insisted that none of the divine attributes are properties that are distinct and separate in the Godhead itself. Rather, each one is only a logical concomitant of one reality, necessary or independent existence itself.¹⁰ It is

¹⁰ For example, since God exists necessarily, He can have neither beginning nor end, and is thus eternal; since God has no parts whatsoever, He cannot be a composite of actuality and potentiality, and is therefore wholly actual; since

thus that God must be recognized as fundamentally simple and one in Himself: He has no parts of any kind, no essence as distinct from His existence, and no attributes that function as separable properties within Him. God must be radically and absolutely simple because if He was not, He would not exist necessarily of Himself, but because of the cohesion of discrete parts, the combination of separate attributes, or the joining of essence with existence through a cause. Consequently, whatever attribute is proper to Him must be identical to His essence, which in turn is identical to His existence; thus, all of His proper attributes are identical to one another, in all being identical to His essence.¹¹

We now see how such terms as the *Simple Reality* and the *Necessarily Existent* or *Necessary Being* were thus used by Mullá Šadrá to refer to God, just as they are employed in the Writings, as part of the post-Avicennan intellectual heritage of the Islamic world. The Central Figures Themselves have emphasized or affirmed the doctrine of divine simplicity and the identity of God's attributes and His essence, and even His essence with His existence. The Báb, for instance, not only states that God's ostensibly diverse attributes, such as knowledge and power, are one with and identical to His essence (and thus to one another), but that this is also true of His *life*, His existence: "God's knowledge is His essence; His *life* is His essence; His power is His essence."¹² Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh—in addition to the affirmation quoted earlier¹³—speaks of God's existence, in the *Lawḥ-i-'Abdu'l-Vahháb*, as being absolute and essential to Him, insofar as essential or absolute existence is not preceded by a cause, and such existence is limited to God.¹⁴ These points, in addition to the Central Figures' general support of divine simplicity, demonstrate Bahá'u'lláh's affirmation of God as the kind of ultimate reality that Avicenna, as well as other classical theists, have described. Likewise, 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms the absolute unity of God, and the identify of His attributes and His essence, in *Some Answered Questions*. There He states that

any change involves the actualization of a potential, and there is no potential in God, He cannot change, etc. Nonetheless, God's eternity, actuality, and immutability are simply different descriptions of His one and undivided essence, which is absolute existence. They are not separate properties in God, but rather concomitants of necessary and absolute existence.

¹¹ In book 8, chapter 1 of the metaphysical part of *ash-Shifá*, Avicenna presents an argument for God's existence, as summarized above; in book 8, chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 he deduces God's attributes from His necessary existence; in book 1, chapter 5 he argues for the distinction of essence and existence; and in book 1, chapters 6 and 7 he analyses, in a preliminary fashion, the nature of the Necessarily Existent.

¹² "Tawqí'-i-Ḥadrat-i-Rabb-i-A'lá," 15.

¹³ "... the multiplicity of various names and attributes shall never be joined unto His essence, for His attributes are verily His essence itself" (*Má'idiy-i-Ásmání*, 4: 329-313).

¹⁴ *Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ-i-Mubárákih*, 165.

the Divine reality “admits of no division, for division and multiplicity are among the characteristics of created and hence contingent things, and not accidents impinging upon the Necessary Being.”¹⁵ He states, in addition: “the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is sanctified above all understanding.”¹⁶

Nonetheless, although Avicenna may have framed these metaphysical terms or ideas, certain notions, alluded to by Bahá'u'lláh, are distinctive of Mullá Şadrá's thought. Mullá Şadrá distinguished himself from Avicenna by positing the primacy of existence or being (*aşálatu'l-wujúd*) over essence—and not their relative parity in contingent beings—and he presented the concomitant idea of the world as a constant flux or flow of being that is modulated or graded by various kinds of degree, with intensity and debilitation (*shiddat* and *da'f*) as the most important. Mullá Şadrá thus argued that as contingent beings proceed from God, the existence of those beings is of progressively weaker *intensity*. Accordingly, all beings are vortices, exhibiting more or less existential intensity and perfection, in the surging plenum of existence.¹⁷ God alone, as the necessary being, possesses, and is, an existence of infinite intensity and perfection, without any debilitation or privation whatsoever, Who operates as the limit case in the scale of being.

Avicenna, in contrast, does not speak of the *existence* of a contingent being as less “potent” or “intense,” just as derivative proximately from its immediate cause and ultimately from God; the term *existence* thus differs in sense by virtue of the relative contingency, priority and posteriority in causal relation, and contrasting perfection and nobility, of different beings—but not because existence constitutes a scale exhibiting diverse degrees of intensity or debilitation—with God's as intensity's limit case—throughout an interpenetrating flux of being. In addition, for Avicenna the essence remains the “reality particular to a thing”—a description God alone, in being pure existence, transcends—while for Mullá Şadrá, it is by reason of a contingent being's having a certain degree of privation or debilitation of existence that, when considered by the mind, an idea of its having an essence—which is ultimately notional—is produced. Yet simplicity for Mullá Şadrá, as for Avicenna, retains its theological centrality: God alone, as the Necessary Being, possesses, and is, an existence of infinite intensity and perfection, without any debilitation or privation whatsoever, and uncorrelated with any essence. Since He is pure and absolute existence,

¹⁵ *Some Answered Questions*, 127.

¹⁶ *Some Answered Questions*, 168.

¹⁷ Rizvi, 102-3.

without any privation or relations of dependence, He is wholly simple being and thus the “simple reality.” Mullá Şadrá himself, as Rizvi notes, denies pantheism or the identity of contingent beings with God, for God has no privation of existence whatsoever. Thus, for Mullá Şadrá, insofar as any created thing is defined by an essence and is something distinct from absolute and necessary existence, it is distinct from the Godhead.¹⁸ God, as the Necessarily Existent and the Simple Reality, is pure existence itself at its most perfect, without any privation, Who bestows being onto all other things.¹⁹

With these metaphysical principles outlined, we can understand Bahá’u’lláh’s main and three auxiliary interpretations of the dictum “the Simple Reality is all things.” The concern is that, according to the outward meaning of the statement, God is identical to all other things. Under this interpretation, God is like a white light which, in refraction, itself takes on the incidental qualities of color, and becomes dispersed in their multiplicity. Bahá’u’lláh clearly rejects this pantheistic reading—a reading that would itself misrepresent the nuance of Mullá Şadrá’s theology and the intent behind his statement. Instead, Bahá’u’lláh states that in the phrase “the Simple Reality is all things,” the “all” means *the possessor*—and one without parts or division—while “things” in turn signifies “the perfections of existence *qua* existence.” Bahá’u’lláh states:

Know that the meaning of ‘things’ in this connection is nothing else but existence and the perfections of existence *qua* existence, while the meaning of ‘all’ is the possessor thereof. This ‘all’ admitteth of no division and of no parts. Thus, the Simple Reality, because it is simple in all aspects, is the possessor and totality of all limitless perfections, as it hath been said, ‘there is no limit to His handiwork.’

According to Bahá’u’lláh, the dictum thus translates to: “God, the simple reality, is the possessor, in a simple manner, of existence and the perfections of existence *qua* existence.” What, then, are the perfections of existence *qua* existence, existence insofar as it is existence? The perfections of

¹⁸ *Mullá Şadrá and Metaphysics: Modulation of Being*, 105.

¹⁹ Although Mullá Şadrá is no pantheist, his giving primacy to existence over essence—the latter having a merely notional reality—and his making God the limit case in the scale of being, could result in a less robust conception of divine transcendence than what is seen in Avicenna. Avicenna more emphatically stresses the ontological gulf between God and His creatures, and he articulates this disparity through the essence-existence distinction: God is the sole reality that, transcending essence, is a pure act of existence. Bahá’u’lláh treats Mullá Şadrá charitably, notes that he did not really espouse pantheism, and endorses what it is the correct interpretation of “the Simple Reality is all things.” In general terms, however, I suspect Bahá’u’lláh’s teaching tends more readily to affirm the Avicennan approach, given how much Bahá’u’lláh stresses God’s transcendence, as we will see further on in this introduction.

existence, insofar as it is existence, may be understood as those attributes that can be deduced from the fullness of necessary existence itself, not as distinct from it, but as logical concomitants to it. That is, it could refer to attributes that are entailed by necessary or absolute existence itself—existence *qua* or *as* existence and not particularized by any finite essence. Thus, whatever perfection follows from necessary existence—such as simplicity, unity, pure actuality, immateriality, self-subsistent being, eternity, immutability, supreme causal power, and so on—is the possession of God (and, as explained before, identical to God’s essence). That is, just as Avicenna reasoned, God possesses all the logical and concomitant properties of necessary existence, which are considered to be divine attributes. In contrast, the perfections of existence *qua* the essence of some particular being, such as the perfections of a tree or man or triangle, are not identical to God’s essence, and such attributes entail the finitude displayed by such dependent realities. Thus, the perfections of existence *qua* existence point to the concomitants of God’s infinite being and to His pure, unconditioned, and absolute existence.

The perfections of existence *qua* existence, in addition, could refer to what Scholastic philosophers called the “transcendentals of being,” properties that, transcending the Aristotelian ten categories, include truth, goodness, unity, and sometimes beauty. Although a detailed explanation of the transcendentals is outside the scope of this analysis, the transcendentals have been construed as those logical concomitants or co-extensions of existence that are “convertible” with being: anything, insofar as it exists, is true since it has reality; any existent, in being individual, has unity; goodness, since it is the actuality or perfection of existence, is proper to anything insofar as it exists; and lastly, beauty may be seen kind of gestalt property attendant to truth, goodness, and unity in their apprehension as excellent by the perceiver. Therefore, although created things manifest truth, goodness, unity, and beauty (the perfections of existence *qua* existence) in various degrees of limitation—as circumscribed by their finite modes of essence—God, as infinite and necessary existence itself, is maximally true, good, one, and beautiful. He is thus the possessor and totality of all *limitless* perfections.

An additional, though related, sense and profounder meaning may be gleaned from Bahá’u’lláh’s explanation, one that could likewise be something of a point of commonality with Bahá’í metaphysics and Mullá Saдрá’s philosophy. God, as the ultimate source of all things, encompasses the powers and perfections of all created things, and contains these perfections within Himself as their cause. Indeed, according to an influential principle in Medieval philosophy known

as *proportionate causality*, since nothing comes from nothing, an effect in some sense must preexist or be contained within its cause—either in the same way (as when a fire, being hot, heats the air around it), or in a superior form (as when an artist fashions a work and makes it reflect his or her sensibility). Thus, while God must contain, as their cause, the perfections of all created things, in Him these perfections are neither multiple nor entail any connection with finitude or contingency. Instead, these perfections are one and simple, as contained in a higher and supremely excellent way within His absolute existence and unity. Bahá'u'lláh thus states that God is the possessor and totality of all limitless perfections “in a simple manner.”

The phrase “in a simple manner” emphasizes the central point that God possesses all perfections, but in complete oneness, and not by exhibiting these perfections as discrete properties and multiple attributes adhering within His essence. Consequently, the perfections of being, multiple and limited in finite creatures, are one, simple, and infinite in God (infinity as here applied to Him thus refers not to Him *numerically*, but *qualitatively* by virtue of His maximal perfection). He is Himself transcendent and indivisible being, unlimited and inexhaustible existence. As infinite existence, God is superlatively perfect and all-encompassing. Lacking nothing, needing nothing, limited by no finite mode, God can act as the infinite and inexhaustible source of all finite beings, since He—as absolute and pure existence itself—enjoys a superfluity of reality. Everything that is created and sustained in being owes that finite being to Him as an overflow or emanation of His undiminishable existence. By Him, therefore, are all things held in being, even as it is by Him that anything is actualized in being and perfection, such that all finite things, in their deficient being and perfection, point to Him who is all-sufficient being and all-sufficing perfection.

God is thus *all things* in the nonliteral sense of having in Himself the fullness and perfection of infinite existence, so as to be the source of all finite things, the cause of their actuality in being—while still transcending those contingent beings and their imperfections. To use an analogy, God is like the *source* of pure white light that, not being itself refracted, contains in a higher and simple way all the various colors as their ultimate source, without ever becoming any one of them or constituted by them. To say that the cause thus encompasses its effect—and the divine cause His creatures—far from entailing their identity, in fact serves to emphasize the distinction, superiority, and greater perfection of the cause and its perfection in relation to whatever depends upon it.

Thomas Aquinas, who like Mullá Şadrá was influenced by Avicenna’s thought, eloquently expresses and clarifies the idea that God is His own existence, and contains all perfections in a

simple and united way, while remaining distinct from contingent beings, in his treatise *De Esse et Essentia* (*Essence and Existence*). He writes (italics mine):

Even though we say that God is existence alone we do not fall into the error of those who said that God is that universal existence by which everything formally exists. The existence which is God is of such a kind that no addition can be made to it, whence through its purity it is distinct from every other existence . . . Similarly, although God is existence alone, the remaining perfections and nobilities are not lacking in him. On the contrary, he has all the perfections that exist in every genus, and for this reason he is called perfect without qualification . . . *But God has these perfections in a more excellent way than all other things have them because in him they are one, while in other things they are diverse.* And this is because all these perfections pertain to God according to his simple existence, just as, if someone through one quality could effect the operations of all qualities, such a person would have in that one quality all the qualities, so too does God in his very existence have all the perfections.²⁰

More importantly, however, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, especially in *Some Answered Questions*, often speaks of the higher levels of reality as encompassing the lower levels, and thus containing (“in a higher way” as Aquinas would say) their perfections while surpassing them in the perfection of being. Since God is the ultimate reality and the source of all things, He encompasses them by being absolute perfection itself and the cause of their perfections, while remaining utterly sanctified from them in their limitations and imperfections. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá thus states: “. . . the divine Essence is an all-encompassing reality, and all created things are encompassed. The all-encompassing must assuredly be greater than that which is encompassed, and thus the latter can in no wise discover the former or comprehend its reality.”²¹

The above, then, is what I take to be the core of Bahá’u’lláh’s interpretation of “the Simple Reality is all things,” and the justification for His claim that this dictum does not imply pantheism. Indeed, Bahá’u’lláh pointedly refers to this fact when He quotes the rest of the statement itself: “The Simple Reality is all things, but not any one of them.” He accordingly stresses, as we quoted before, “God Himself hath ever been, and shall forever remain, sanctified from ascent, descent,

²⁰ *De Esse et Essentia*, 5.2.

²¹ *Some Answered Questions*, 165.

and limitation, connection to, and association with, all other things. All other things, in contrast, abide in the sphere of their specific limitations.”

Bahá'u'lláh's Three Auxiliary Interpretations

What follows in the *Tablet of the Simple Reality* are what I call Bahá'u'lláh's three auxiliary interpretations. They are auxiliary because, though they more generally touch on the meanings or stations of *tawhíd* (divine oneness or simplicity), they are relevant to, and elaborate on, “the Simple Reality is all things.” Bahá'u'lláh couches these interpretations as discussions of different stations of *tawhíd*, entailing both that God is without likeness and that in Him there is no multiplicity—that He is simple and absolutely one.

The first station of *tawhíd* is *tawhíd-i-vujúdí*, or *ontological oneness*. This is connected with, or an expression of, the doctrine of the unity of being (*vahdatu'l-vujúd*), popular among Sufis, who often construed the doctrine as meaning that God is the only real existent and that, consequently, whatever *is* must be God. Bahá'u'lláh's interpretation of ontological oneness is that created things, when considered in themselves, do have existence, and that they are distinct from God. But God is alone and the only real existent in the qualified sense that, compared to Him, nothing else really exists. This is because God is His own pure and absolute being, necessary and self-subsistent. Compared to this, the contingent existence of created things is as nothing, because their existence is derivative from external causes and is thus conditional, contingent, and incidental to their essences, and thus radically imperfect. Nonetheless, considered in themselves, contingent beings do exist and cannot be collapsed or dissolved into the divine sphere of being. In *Some Answered Questions*, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá clarifies this point succinctly in the short chapter titled “The Reality of the World of Being,” where He states (*italics mine*) that the notion of the sophists “that all existence is illusory” is “false, for although the existence of things is an illusion *compared* to the existence of God, yet in the contingent world it is established proven and undeniable.”²² ‘Abdu'l-Bahá compares the comparative nonexistence of creatures to God to the nonbeing of the mineral as compared with the human being. This analogy, entailing as it does only the comparative deficiency of the mineral and preserving its essential distinction from the human being, serves to

²² *Some Answered Questions*, 321-22.

underline the non-pantheistic ramifications of ontological oneness as understood by Bahá'í metaphysics.

The second station of *tawhíd* discussed by Bahá'u'lláh is *phenomenological oneness*, or *tawhíd-i-shuhúdí*. This refers not to the claim that God is the sole existent, but rather to the subjective experience of God as one with the world or immanent in and through all things. Because this kind of *tawhíd* relates to the mystic's experience of oneness with God and nearness to Him, it is phenomenological and not ontological—it has to do with the experience of being and not with existence as distinct from human experience. Bahá'u'lláh explains that since each thing is a “sign” of God—for each thing, in having contingent existence, points to the absolute existence of God as its Creator—God is revealed in the creation, and His effulgence, His light, and His glory can be discerned in the created order of the world.²³ It is the experience of this effulgence which creates the perception of phenomenological oneness. Nonetheless, this sense of oneness is at the level of phenomenology or subjective experience; God in Himself remains entirely distinct from His creation at the level of ontology.

The third interpretation of *tawhíd* relates to the Manifestation of God in His spiritual reality as the Word, the Primal Will, or First Intellect—the first being in the emanation of existence from God, *through* which God creates all lower levels of being.²⁴ Bahá'u'lláh states that positive assertions and adjectives, as made by human beings, do not literally apply to the Godhead, for He is so far transcends human comprehension and conceptualization. This does not rule out, however, that we can attain to negative knowledge of God, or correctly know what He is *not*. We can, for example, know that He is not contingently existent, composite, deficient, one with or within the world, and so forth. But our positive descriptions of His knowledge, power, and wisdom cannot literally or univocally apply to Him, since our ideas of such things are acquired through our experience of the created world, and do not constitute a direct apprehension of God in His essence and existence. This is why divine simplicity, the fact that God is absolute unity and that His attributes are one with His essence and existence and hence with one another, is so hard for us to understand. It is also why human praise of God more immediately refers to the Manifestation, Who

²³ In this connection, Vahid Rafati writes (as I translate his Persian): “The meaning of *phenomenological oneness* is that all existing things share in one condition, and are in perfect unity, insofar as they all relate of the effulgence of the Divine Essence, and insofar as there is nothing in creation whose existence does not point to the splendors of God and give evidence of His universal emanation of existence onto all things” (30).

²⁴ As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains in *Some Answered Questions*, chapter 53.

is the instrument of God’s creative act and the channel of His universal grace—He manifests God and hence is the medium of God’s immanent bestowal of being to the world.

Accordingly, Bahá’u’lláh says that “the Simple Reality is all things” could be understood as referring to the reality of the Manifestation as the instrumental creator and sustainer of the cosmos, Who possesses, in His reality, all perfections in a simple manner, and encompasses created beings through being their instrumental cause. Bahá’u’lláh, however, expresses an important qualification: He says that the Manifestation is simple in a relative way, and not in an absolute way as the Godhead is. I think we can understand this as expressive of the fact that the Manifestation is simple in having no physical parts or materiality,²⁵ but does have an essence distinct from His existence, insofar as He, too, derives His existence from the transcendent Godhead. Consequently, the Manifestation has the minimal metaphysical “parts” of essence and existence. This, at least, would make sense of Bahá’u’lláh’s statement here.

From the basis of the above discussion, we can see how Bahá’u’lláh unfolds a total and self-cohering explanation of Mullá Şadrá’s dictum. Bahá’u’lláh states that the correct understanding of the doctrine of ontological oneness is that God can be thought of as the sole reality merely under a highly qualified sense: God alone exists not because all other things are identical to Him, but because, compared to Him, they can be “thought of” as nonexistent, “notwithstanding that other things have existed and continue to exist.” Accordingly, created things remain distinct from God, and are not permeated by or subsumed in Him. It is merely that their contingent existence is so infinitely inferior to the necessary existence of God that, when compared to their Creator Who Himself is the uncreated, they themselves must appear as nothingness, such is their imperfection. This is the correct understanding of ontological oneness, as interpreted by Bahá’u’lláh: Far from blurring the distinction between God and His creatures, it emphasizes that distinction and casts it into stark relief. This is because this version of ontological oneness entails that contingent beings are so different from God that the very way they *exist* is different from the manner of God’s existence; He exists necessarily and unconditionally, while they exist contingently and conditionally.

Nonetheless, insofar as these created things have any instantiation in being at all, they have that being from God and hence are “signs” of Him. God creates the world and sustains it in being, and therefore within it may be discerned the operation of His continually creative act in all things.

²⁵ I am, of course, referring to the Manifestation wholly in His spiritual station.

If, upon discerning the sustaining power of God’s grace operative throughout all existence, the mystic should see in all things nothing but God—as an overwhelming radiance shining through the transparent and diaphanous being of the creatures—this would not contradict the unqualified ontological fact that God utterly transcends His creation and that the distinction between the divine and created orders cannot be dissolved through an essential or substantive union. The experience of such unity between the creature and the divine would rather reflect the mystic’s phenomenological apprehension.

Both of these stations of *tawhīd* as presented by Bahá’u’lláh integrally relate to His interpretation of “the Simple Reality of all things.” If God, under ontological oneness, is the only real existent, then He, the Simple Reality, just is “all things.” Yet this proposition is to be understood in accordance with Bahá’u’lláh’s first interpretation, which states that “things” refers to all the perfections proper to independent existence; God has all perfections not as discrete attributes, but in the complete unity of His being, which in its infinity and perfection can act as the all-encompassing cause of all finite and imperfect beings. Since God is one or unique at the level of being, the term *ontological oneness* is used. Since He is the supremely real, there is a sense in which He is the only reality or encompasses, by virtue of His superlative perfection and infinite being, all other reality. But this affirmation, far from entailing monism under Bahá’u’lláh’s interpretation, in fact confirms the distinction between Him and His creatures, insofar as both He and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá qualify ontological oneness by saying that created things do have a mode of actual existence.

With regard to phenomenological oneness, if everything with positive existence is a “sign” of God, since He is the Creator of all existents, then He is “all things”—or all perfections of existence—insofar as He can be known as revealed in His creation on account of being the supreme source of existence and perfections, even though He is definitely not identical to the world or one with it. What is critical here is that both stations of *tawhīd* as interpreted by Bahá’u’lláh exclude an actually pantheistic or monistic understanding of “the Simple Reality is all things.” Similarly, ontological oneness and phenomenological oneness are logically compatible, and not at all contradictory, when Bahá’u’lláh subtly qualifies the sense of ontological oneness in a manner that both affirms the transcendence of the Deity and denies the dissolution of created things within

Him, and when He assures us, under the discussion of phenomenological oneness, that created things are signs of God but not God Himself.²⁶

Lastly, in respect to the third of the auxiliary interpretations, Bahá'u'lláh's statement that the dictum applies to the intermediary reality of the Manifestation—Who in His divine station as the Primal Will acts as the instrumental cause on which the material world depends—not only preserves the transcendence of the absolute Deity but also reiterates the point that a cause, in this case the Primal Will, must contain within itself the perfections of its effects, even if in a higher, more excellent, and simple way. This interpretation not only has legitimacy within the sphere of Bahá'í metaphysics. In Mullá Şadra's thought an analog to the Primal Will, “deployable being” or *vujúd-i-munbasit*, operates as the first emanation of the Necessarily Existent and functions as an intermediate and simple hypostasis from which the rest of creation proceeds.²⁷ In the last interpretation, Bahá'u'lláh thus resolves the apparent pantheism of the “Simple Reality is all things” in favor of radical transcendence by stating that the statement refers, not to God's essence, but rather to the first emanation intermediate between Him and the world—and He does this in a way that applies for both Bahá'í and Şadrian metaphysics.

These, then, are Bahá'u'lláh's three interpretations of *tawhíd*, and they fit seamlessly with His first explanation of the “Simple Reality is all things.” Upon providing these understandings, Bahá'u'lláh closes the metaphysical section of the Tablet and transitions into a short discussion of the history of philosophy, and then into an important assertion that philosophical understandings of God must be paired with a recognition of the Manifestation for this day in order to be worthwhile. The Tablet is concluded with a passionate supplication revealed in Arabic, in contrast to the mainly Persian antecedent text.

Theism and Pantheism

The analysis above naturally represents my own understanding of the concepts—implicit and explicit, philosophical and theological—affirmed by Bahá'u'lláh in the *Lawḥ-i-Basítu'l-Ḥaqqíqih*. The reader may have noticed that the reading presented above differs from the one offered by Dr. Momen in his 2010 introduction to his provisional translation of the text. As his is notably the first

²⁶ Rafati thus notes that “the Simple reality is all things” is correct when considered under either one of the two kinds of *tawhíd* (30).

²⁷ Rizvi, 128.

piece of major scholarship on the subject in English (so far as I am aware), it would be worthwhile to address these differences through an alternative point of view, since our knowledge may be increased through discussion and scholarly consultation, and further perspectives may be offered in the future that can glean the best critical approach to this text.

Dr. Momen writes that Bahá'u'lláh's objective in the *Lawḥ-i-Basítu'l-Ḥaqíqih* is to reconcile the positions of those who supported theism and of those who supported monism or pantheism, the latter represented by the view of unity of being or ontological oneness, and the former by the view of phenomenological oneness. Dr. Momen writes:

In brief it may be said that those who supported the position of *Waḥdat al-Wujúd* maintained that Being is one—it is that which exists. Since existence is also one of the essential attributes of God, then it may be said that all things are subsumed in the one Absolute Reality that we call God. This one Reality has different aspects according to the way that it is viewed.

Those who held to the opposing position of *Waḥdat ash-Shuhúd* maintained that God is beyond any conceptualizations that can be made of Him; he is *wará' al-wará thumma wará' al-wará thumma wará' al-wará* (beyond the beyond, then beyond the beyond, and again beyond the beyond). Hence the mystics' experience of unity or union or any apprehension of God through mystical experience is subjective only and has no objective validity. The unity that mystics claim with God is only an appearance and has no substance.²⁸

Later on, Dr. Momen writes on what he thinks Bahá'u'lláh's method was in correctly determining the meaning of “the Simple Reality is all things” and choosing between the two views outlined above:

Bahá'u'lláh first explains the nature of the division among Muslims over Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum and the associated concepts. He brings forward verses from the Qur'an in support of both positions. For those who follow Mullá Ṣadrá's position, which he here calls *Tawḥíd-i-Wujúdi* (existential oneness), Bahá'u'lláh quotes the Qur'anic verse "All things perish save [His] face" (28:8, cf. 55:27) and interprets this to support the position of those who assert that the only reality is the Divine Reality. For those who opposed Mullá Ṣadrá's position, which he here calls *Tawḥíd-i-Shuhúdí* (oneness in appearance only), Bahá'u'lláh quotes the Qur'anic verse "We shall show them

²⁸ “Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality (*Lawḥ Basít al-Ḥaqíqa*): A Provisional Translation,” 204.

Our signs on the horizons and in themselves." (41:53) This he interprets as saying that any evidence of union between the Divinity and creation is only the result of the fact that the signs of God are apparent in all things.

Having defined the two sides of the conflict, Bahá'u'lláh asserts that those who have attacked Mullá Şadrá's position have looked only at the literal meaning of his words rather than the underlying meaning. He then goes on to give an interpretation of Mullá Şadrá's dictum in terms of the concept of the Manifestation of God.²⁹

In essence, then, Dr. Momen suggests that Bahá'u'lláh presents evidence for both positions, what I have translated as *ontological oneness* (*tawhíd-i-vujúdí*) and *phenomenological oneness* (*tawhíd-i-shuhúdí*), and then asserts that both can be considered true when applied to the reality of the Manifestation.

An alternative reading from this has been presented in the introduction above. According to this alternative reading, Bahá'u'lláh frames his whole exegesis of the dictum through his first interpretation, and the other interpretations, headed as stations of divine unity, merely function as continuing stages in the unfolding of Bahá'u'lláh's complete explanation. Bahá'u'lláh does not need to reconcile ontological oneness and phenomenological oneness in terms of a third perspective—that of the Manifestation of God—because He already declines a pantheistic understanding of Mullá Şadrá's dictum in the Tablet's first paragraph, and then proceeds to articulate a fully theistic and non-monistic reading of the term ontological oneness in subsequent paragraphs, a reading that logically coheres with both His presentation of phenomenological oneness and His explanation of how the dictum could also refer to the Manifestation of God. Accordingly, Bahá'u'lláh only mentions the limited readings of others critical of Mullá Şadrá, who merely looked on the outward meaning of his words, *after* and not before He mentions the applicability of the idea of the Manifestation of God. This sequence illustrates that the discussion of the Manifestation is not the focal point that resolves previously considered and contradicting theories, but is rather but another aspect of Bahá'u'lláh's multi-staged and self-cohering exegesis.

Created things are not subsumed within God's existence under Bahá'u'lláh's interpretation of *ontological oneness*. They do exist as distinct from Him, yet while their existence is contingent and dependent, His is necessary, independent, and absolute. Thus, it is merely as though they are

²⁹ "Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality," 209.

nothing when compared to Him, and thus may be “thought of” as nonexistent, “notwithstanding that other things have existed and continue to exist.” As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá likewise stressed, they remain distinct things and do have existence in their own right, however deficient it may be. But this very point—that created things are not subsumed in God so as to be in any way one with Him—is emphasized in the beginning of the Tablet: “Here, the philosopher’s intent was not that the Necessarily Existent hath permeated or become divided among limitless entities. Exalted is He above that!” This assertion is not contradicted in the discussion of ontological oneness, since Bahá’u’lláh is careful to note that created things are nonexistent only when compared to God—a statement that in fact emphasizes God’s transcendence—and does not imply that they are in any sense identical to Him. Thereafter, when Bahá’u’lláh speaks of phenomenological oneness—which entails that God is present in creation to the degree that things point to their Creator, not that He permeates the created order like an ethereal substance—it can be presented as logically complementary to ontological oneness, since the latter has already been cleared of any pantheistic content.

Thus, before Bahá’u’lláh addresses the question of how “the Simple Reality is all things” relates to the Manifestation of God, He Himself has apparently dismissed monism and pantheism, and has explained that the dictum does not entail any monistic doctrine. Therefore, Bahá’u’lláh does not seem to be giving evidence for two perspectives, monism and theism, that are logically contradictory, and then reconciling them in reference to a third perspective. Instead, Bahá’u’lláh’s account of the two “stations” of *tawhíd*, ontological and phenomenological, are already logically compatible with each other and with His first and primary interpretation of the dictum—an interpretation, as we have seen, that self-consciously precludes pantheism. By the time we reach the third auxiliary interpretation of “the Simple Reality is all things,” which relates it to the Manifestation of God, there is nothing to reconcile, since each of Bahá’u’lláh’s various explanations is logically compatible with the others. In addition, the Bahá’í notion of the Manifestation can be seen as correlating with the Saḍrian idea of the Perfect Man, whose spiritual reality is simple in comparison to beings below him in the hierarchy of existence.³⁰ Thus Bahá’u’lláh, even in this interpretation, can still be read as providing a charitable exegesis of Mullá Saḍrá, and not as reconciling non-Bahá’í theories through an exclusively Bahá’í perspective.

³⁰ Rizvi, 129-30.

Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh suggests that there are, in fact, incorrect ways of understanding “the Simple Reality is all things,” and the context implies that these are pantheistic or monistic readings. For example, Bahá'u'lláh states:

Indeed, this saying of the philosopher admitteth of praiseworthy interpretations, as well as limited ones. Both kinds of interpretation have been and are extant. Some mature thinkers, in the interest of protecting the Cause of God, have refuted it in its outward meaning. Notwithstanding, this imprisoned Servant only desireth to make mention of the good.

Bahá'u'lláh underscores that there *are* limited interpretations of Mullá Şadrá's statement, and that “mature thinkers” (perhaps Shaykh Aḥmad and others, as Dr. Momen pointed out in his own introduction) have refuted its outward, or pantheistic, meaning. Bahá'u'lláh evidently regards the non-pantheistic reading of Mullá Şadrá's dictum as the correct and most charitable one possible. In this spirit, He remarks:

. . . the objections of some to the statement of the philosopher are without foundation, for they had not understood his intent. In truth, one cannot be content with merely considering the outward meaning of a person's statements and repudiating them, except in respect to those people who are openly blasphemous—the words of such people are not deserving of figurative interpretation.

In this context, it seems that the openly blasphemous people are those who actually believe and assert that there is no real distinction between God and His creatures—that He is somehow constitutive of the beings of the natural world, and that anyone can attain substantive union with Him. This understanding of what Bahá'u'lláh is expressing here would accord well with His statements in other places, where He emphatically and decisively rejects any monism and pantheism. As translated by Shoghi Effendi in *Gleanings*, Bahá'u'lláh states:

Regard thou the one true God as One Who is apart from, and immeasurably exalted above, all created things. The whole universe reflecteth His glory, while He is Himself independent of, and transcendeth His creatures. This is the true meaning of Divine unity. . . All existence is dependent upon Him, and from Him is derived the source of the sustenance of all things. This is what is meant by Divine unity; this is its fundamental principle.

Some, deluded by their idle fancies, have conceived all created things as associates and partners of God, and imagined themselves to be the exponents of His unity. By Him Who is the one true God! Such men have been, and will continue to remain, the victims of blind imitation, and are to be numbered with them that have restricted and limited the conception of God.³¹

Consequently, it does not seem that Bahá'u'lláh entertains the opposite view at any place in the *Lawḥ-i-Basíṭu'l-Ḥaqqíqih*—that God is somehow one with His creation—and thus He need not reconcile monism with theism.

Since Bahá'u'lláh's first interpretation of “the Simple Reality is all things” denies that it has pantheistic content, and since His subsequent discussion need not entail any support of monism, I propose that one can understand Bahá'u'lláh's statements in Tablet as fully consistent in their metaphysical claims. In short, my reading differs from Dr. Momen's in proposing that there is no reconciliation of monism or pantheism with theism in the *Lawḥ-i-Basíṭu'l-Ḥaqqíqih*; instead, there is a straightforward insistence on theism and rejection of monism, and this—or so I suggest—is in fact the central concern of the text, as it unfolds, in four stages, an explanation of the dictum in which the overarching exegesis of it remains that God is the possessor of the perfections of existence *qua* existence. If this reading is accurate, it would accord with Bahá'u'lláh's many statements in other places where He stresses the absolute transcendence of God. While Bahá'u'lláh may not be reconciling monism as such with theism in the Tablet, Dr. Momen quite rightly takes note of the mildness of Bahá'u'lláh's reconciliatory approach in this work. This is evidenced by the fact that Bahá'u'lláh, instead of merely saying that Mullá Ṣadrá's dictum and the Sufis' concept of *ontological oneness* are wholly false, instead preserves their terminology while interpreting their positions in a way that is in accord with His own teachings. This method is common in Bahá'u'lláh writings, and indicates that He not only intends to clarify theological matters but also to establish unity and fellowship among formerly divided people.

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