

The Spectrum of Knowledge in the Bahá'í Faith: Material, Conceptual, Existential, Moral, and Divine Forms of Knowing

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Abstract

This article presents a systematic examination of the Bahá'í typology of knowledge, analyzing seven categories identified within the Bahá'í writings: material, conceptual, existential, moral, divine, intrinsic divine, and true knowledge in conformity with reality. Drawing upon the authoritative texts of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, it explores how these forms of knowledge contribute to the Bahá'í vision of epistemological unity and the spiritual advancement of humanity. This study clarifies how the Bahá'í understanding of knowledge integrates scientific, moral, and spiritual dimensions within a teleological framework.

Introduction

The question of knowledge stands at the heart of the Bahá'í Faith's vision of human purpose, moral development, and the advancement of civilization. In the Bahá'í writings, knowledge is not merely a tool for technical mastery or a neutral accumulation of facts; it is fundamentally tied to the human soul's capacity for growth, its relationship with the divine, and its responsibility toward the collective progress of humanity. The acquisition and application of knowledge shape not only individual character but the possibilities for justice, peace, and the realization of unity within an increasingly interconnected world. For this reason, the Bahá'í teachings consistently call for the independent investigation of truth, warning against the spiritual stagnation that arises from imitation, superstition, and blind adherence to inherited traditions. At the same time, the Bahá'í writings offer a positive and systematic vision of what knowledge is, how it functions, and how its diverse forms are to be integrated within a unified conception of reality.

Despite the centrality of knowledge in the Bahá'í teachings, the typology of knowledge presented in these writings has not yet been thoroughly systematized within the context of Bahá'í Studies. Scattered across various texts by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi, this typology points to a highly structured and philosophically sophisticated vision of knowledge that exceeds common dichotomies between science and religion, reason and faith, or material and spiritual understanding. Instead, the Bahá'í Faith advances a model of knowledge that recognizes distinct domains of inquiry while insisting on their ultimate coherence within a unified, teleological framework. Knowledge, in this view, is always more than technical information or conceptual abstraction; it is oriented toward the realization of human potential, the cultivation of virtues, and the advancement of civilization in accordance with divine purpose.

The purpose of this article is to clarify and systematize this typology of knowledge as articulated in the Bahá'í writings. Drawing primarily on the authoritative texts of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, this study identifies seven interrelated categories of knowledge, each fulfilling a distinct but complementary role within the Bahá'í epistemological framework. These categories are:

material knowledge (‘ilm-i maddī), conceptual knowledge (‘ilm-i tasavvurī), existential knowledge (‘ilm-i wujūdī), moral knowledge (‘ilm-i akhlāqī), divine knowledge (‘ilm-i ilāhī), intrinsic divine knowledge (‘ilm-i dhātī-yi ilāhī), and true knowledge in conformity with reality (‘ilm-i ḥaqīqī muṭābiq ba vāqī‘). This typology is not presented in the Bahá’í texts as a formalized system in the manner of Western philosophical treatises, yet it emerges clearly across various discourses addressing the roles of science, reason, spirituality, and moral development in human life.

The seven categories reflect a comprehensive vision of knowledge that moves from the empirical study of the natural world to the immediate awareness of selfhood, from the embodiment of moral virtues to the recognition of divine realities, culminating in a unified conception of truth aligned with reality itself. Material knowledge concerns the empirical investigation of nature, the sciences, and technologies that enable humanity to harness the powers latent within creation. Conceptual knowledge pertains to the capacities of reason, abstraction, analogy, and inference through which humanity organizes and extends its understanding beyond immediate observation. Existential knowledge refers to the direct, immediate awareness of one’s own being, forming the foundation for moral agency and spiritual responsibility. Moral knowledge is concerned with the embodiment of virtues in action, affirming that knowledge is incomplete without its realization in just and compassionate deeds. Divine knowledge designates the truths revealed through the Manifestations of God, providing guidance that transcends the limitations of unaided human reason. Intrinsic divine knowledge pertains to the eternal, uncreated knowledge that belongs solely to God’s essence, fundamentally inaccessible to human comprehension. Finally, true knowledge in conformity with reality stands as the culmination of these forms, representing the integration of empirical, rational, and spiritual insights within a unified epistemological vision aligned with the ontological structure of existence.

Clarifying these categories is essential for understanding the Bahá’í approach to enduring questions concerning the relationship between science and religion, the role of reason in faith, and the moral dimensions of knowledge. The typology presented here illuminates how the Bahá’í writings envision knowledge not as fragmented or compartmentalized but as a holistic enterprise directed toward the fulfillment of humanity’s spiritual and social potential. By articulating this typology, this article contributes to a more precise and systematic understanding of Bahá’í epistemology within the field of Bahá’í Studies, providing a foundation for further exploration of its implications for science, ethics, and theology.

It is important to clarify the scope of this article. The present study focuses exclusively on the internal logic and articulation of these seven categories of knowledge within the Bahá’í writings. While connections may be drawn implicitly to broader philosophical traditions or to contemporary debates on epistemology, this article does not attempt a comparative analysis with modern Western thought. Such a dialogue—between the Bahá’í typology of knowledge and contemporary epistemological theories, including the works of Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, Michel Foucault, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and others—will be the focus of a separate, forthcoming

article. That second study will examine how Bahá'í epistemology engages with and responds to modern critiques concerning the contingency, power-laden construction, and historical situatedness of knowledge. It will also explore how the Bahá'í vision offers a constructive alternative to models that emphasize epistemic fragmentation or skepticism about truth's attainability.

By separating these two inquiries into distinct studies, this article ensures that the internal structure and theological coherence of the Bahá'í typology of knowledge can be articulated in its own terms, without distraction or dilution by external comparisons. This approach also allows for greater clarity in demonstrating how this typology serves as a foundation for the Bahá'í Faith's broader commitments to the harmony of science and religion, the cultivation of virtues, and the advancement of civilization through the integration of material, moral, and spiritual forms of knowledge.

Material Knowledge ('Ilm-i Maddī)

Material knowledge ('ilm-i maddī) occupies a foundational place within the Bahá'í typology of knowledge. It pertains to humanity's investigation of the material world through observation, experimentation, and rational inquiry, encompassing what is conventionally termed the natural sciences. This domain of knowledge is explicitly praised in the Bahá'í Writings, yet always within a framework that acknowledges both its immense benefits and its inherent limitations. The sciences of nature are celebrated not merely for their capacity to reveal the mechanisms of the physical universe but also as instruments through which humanity fulfills its trust to cultivate the earth, alleviate suffering, and contribute to the advancement of civilization. Bahá'u'lláh affirms that “Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone” (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 51). This affirmation includes material sciences, which uplift and ennoble human life through the discovery of nature's hidden laws and the unfolding of latent possibilities within the world of creation.

'Abdu'l-Bahá elaborates upon this point in numerous public addresses, consistently acknowledging the transformative power of empirical science. In His discourse at Stanford University, He praises material science for having “revealed the secrets of nature and led to wonderful inventions” (The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 96). Such advancements, He suggests, are not opposed to the spiritual mission of humanity but are integral to it when properly directed. The discoveries of science—be they in medicine, agriculture, engineering, or communication—serve the broader purposes of civilization when subordinated to ethical and spiritual aims. The Bahá'í conception of material knowledge thus situates it within a larger teleological framework: it is neither self-sufficient nor ultimate but finds its highest expression in service to humanity's moral and spiritual progress.

Nevertheless, the Bahá'í Writings are equally clear in rejecting the reduction of all knowledge to the empirical domain. While material knowledge concerns itself with the outward forms and phenomena of existence, it does not encompass the entirety of reality. 'Abdu'l-Bahá cautions

against those who exalt the senses to the status of absolute arbiters of truth, observing that “the senses are not to be trusted... these examples show the senses subject to error. How can we put our trust in them?” (The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 95). His critique of sensory empiricism does not deny the validity of empirical methods within their proper sphere but rejects any epistemology that claims sensory data as exhaustive of reality. In His public addresses, He repeatedly distinguishes between material science, which concerns the phenomena of nature, and spiritual science, which concerns the realities of existence beyond the physical: “Material science is the noblest attainment of man, but spiritual science is the discovery of the realities of existence” (The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 354).

This distinction aligns the Bahá’í view with a broader critique of modern positivism and reductionism. The early twentieth century witnessed the rise of the Vienna Circle and its articulation of logical positivism, which sought to confine meaningful statements to those verifiable through empirical observation or reducible to logical tautologies. Under this view, knowledge was equated with propositions capable of empirical confirmation, and all metaphysical, theological, or ethical claims were deemed nonsensical. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, while not itself a positivist manifesto, provided a conceptual framework that influenced this movement profoundly. Wittgenstein’s assertion that “the world is the totality of facts, not things” (*Tractatus*, 1.1) and his model of language as a mirror of atomic facts reinforced the belief that only statements about empirical realities constituted legitimate knowledge. This epistemological stance echoed through the Vienna Circle’s verification principle, which systematically excluded ethical and spiritual discourse from the domain of knowledge.

The Bahá’í Writings reject this narrowing of epistemology, insisting that reality cannot be confined to what is empirically measurable or logically deducible. Bahá’u’lláh’s affirmation that “the source of all learning is the knowledge of God... and this cannot be attained save through the knowledge of His Divine Manifestation” (*Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 156) points to dimensions of reality inaccessible to the instruments of material science. While scientific inquiry reveals aspects of the physical world, it cannot penetrate the realities of the soul, the purposes of existence, or the moral imperatives that govern human life. The sciences may describe how the world operates, but they cannot disclose why it exists or to what ends humanity should direct its powers. In this respect, Bahá’í epistemology aligns more closely with critiques of modern scientism that caution against conflating methodological precision with ontological completeness.

Martin Heidegger’s critique of modern science as calculative thinking provides a valuable philosophical counterpoint to this discussion. In his essay “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger distinguishes between calculative thinking, which seeks efficiency, predictability, and control, and meditative thinking, which contemplates meaning and Being. Calculative thinking reduces nature to a “standing reserve” (*Bestand*), a resource to be exploited, and frames beings solely in terms of their utility. Heidegger warns that this enframing (*Gestell*)

conceals other modes of revealing truth, particularly those tied to dwelling, care, and the poetic disclosure of Being. For Heidegger, the danger lies not in science per se but in the dominance of a worldview that recognizes only the measurable and the manipulable.

The Bahá'í Writings echo this concern in their emphasis on the moral and spiritual dimensions of knowledge. 'Abdu'l-Bahá observes that “the attainment of any object is conditioned upon knowledge, volition and action. Unless these three conditions are forthcoming, there is no execution or accomplishment” (The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 157). Knowledge without moral volition becomes mere calculation; action without ethical guidance leads to harm. Thus, while material knowledge enables humanity to unlock the forces of nature, it requires the balancing influence of moral and spiritual principles to ensure its fruits are directed toward constructive, not destructive, ends. Bahá'u'lláh's vision of knowledge as “a ladder for ascent” underscores this teleological orientation: knowledge should elevate the individual and contribute to the collective advancement of humanity, not serve narrow interests or lead to exploitation.

Within this framework, material knowledge assumes its proper place as a foundational yet limited domain. It is indispensable for the progress of civilization, yielding advances in health, communication, infrastructure, and countless other fields. Its methods of observation, experimentation, and rational analysis are affirmed as legitimate and necessary. However, it cannot claim sovereignty over the whole of reality. Detached from moral and spiritual guidance, material knowledge risks devolving into the calculative domination Heidegger critiques or the epistemic impoverishment the Vienna Circle's positivism exemplifies.

The harmony of science and religion, a central Bahá'í principle, provides the corrective to these tendencies. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's well-known analogy of the two wings—science and religion—captures the essence of this integration: “Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights... Should one wing remain weak, flight is impossible” (Paris Talks, p. 143). Material knowledge without spiritual insight is unbalanced; spiritual aspiration without engagement with the realities of the material world is ineffectual. Together, they enable humanity to achieve its full potential.

Moreover, the Bahá'í Writings caution against the perennial error of conflating provisional scientific theories with ultimate truth. Scientific knowledge is by nature tentative, subject to revision as methods improve and new discoveries emerge. Bahá'u'lláh's assertion that “the source of all learning is the knowledge of God” positions divine revelation as the ultimate referent of truth, while human inquiry, including science, remains a progressive approximation within the bounds of human capacity and circumstance.

In this light, material knowledge must be understood as both vital and incomplete. It serves as a means of uncovering the patterns and mechanisms of the natural world, facilitating technological progress and contributing to human welfare. Yet, it requires integration within a broader epistemological hierarchy that includes conceptual, moral, and spiritual knowledge. Detached

from this broader vision, science risks becoming an end in itself, losing sight of its higher purposes.

The Bahá'í epistemology thus transcends the confines of positivism and the reductionist tendencies of calculative thinking. It affirms a vision of knowledge wherein empirical inquiry, moral responsibility, and spiritual insight are not competing domains but complementary avenues toward a unified apprehension of reality. This vision situates material knowledge within a teleological framework oriented toward the betterment of humanity and the realization of justice, unity, and spiritual fulfillment. Through this integration, the Bahá'í Faith offers a coherent response to the fragmentation of knowledge characteristic of modernity, reaffirming the possibility of a harmonious relationship between science and religion grounded in a shared commitment to truth and the advancement of civilization.

Conceptual Knowledge (‘Ilm-i Tasavvurī)

Conceptual knowledge (‘ilm-i tasavvurī) occupies a pivotal position within the Bahá'í typology of knowledge as it bridges the empirical insights of material knowledge and the higher realms of moral and spiritual understanding. This category refers to the human capacity for abstraction, generalization, systematization, and theoretical reasoning—those intellectual faculties that allow the mind to move beyond the mere accumulation of sensory data toward the construction of coherent worldviews, scientific theories, philosophical systems, and moral frameworks. It is through this faculty that humanity transforms the particular into the universal, the concrete into the abstract, and isolated observations into organized bodies of knowledge.

In the Bahá'í Writings, conceptual knowledge is both affirmed as a distinctive human faculty and warned against when severed from spiritual and ethical foundations. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá praises the rational faculty as the power through which humanity discovers realities not accessible to the senses alone. He states, “There is a need for a universal power in man which should enable him to deduce realities and through which he can acquire knowledge of things. This power is the rational faculty” (Some Answered Questions, p. 220). This faculty is not merely instrumental but reflects a divine trust, enabling humanity to ascend from the limitations of immediate experience to the comprehension of underlying principles and causes. Through reason, humanity constructs the sciences, develops philosophies, formulates systems of law, and apprehends metaphysical truths.

However, the Bahá'í Writings are equally explicit that this faculty, if left unguided by moral and spiritual principles, can lead to error, pride, and detachment from reality. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá warns that “if man’s knowledge and understanding be purely material and human in its limitations, it is imperfect. It is only when he receives inspiration and light from the realm of Reality that his knowledge becomes perfected” (The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 306). Conceptual knowledge, while capable of tremendous intellectual achievements, remains fallible, contingent, and subject to distortion when not aligned with spiritual guidance.

Within the context of modern philosophy, this view of conceptual knowledge resonates with both affirmations and critiques of reason. The Enlightenment project elevated reason as the supreme faculty of humanity, capable of uncovering universal truths through the application of logic, observation, and critical thought. Yet subsequent philosophical movements, from German Idealism to post-structuralism, exposed the limitations of reason when abstracted from its historical, cultural, and existential contexts. For the Bahá'í Faith, reason is neither an autonomous arbiter of truth nor a mere instrument of power but a divinely ordained faculty whose purpose is to uncover reality within a framework oriented toward justice, unity, and spiritual advancement.

The Bahá'í Writings offer examples of the legitimate uses of conceptual knowledge through modes of reasoning such as analogy, induction, allegory, and immediate inference. 'Abdu'l-Bahá frequently employs analogy to elucidate metaphysical principles, drawing parallels between the natural and spiritual worlds to reveal underlying harmonies. For example, He compares the growth of the soul to the development of a plant, suggesting that just as a plant requires specific conditions to thrive, so too does the soul require the nurture of divine education. Allegory, likewise, serves as a tool for conveying spiritual realities in accessible forms, aligning with the Qur'anic and Biblical traditions of parable and metaphor.

Inductive reasoning holds a significant place in Bahá'í thought as well. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explicitly endorses induction as the foundation of scientific progress, stating that “all sciences are based upon inductive reasoning... inferring the unknown from the known” (Some Answered Questions, p. 220). The progression from observation to generalization, from particular facts to universal laws, reflects the rational faculty's role in constructing coherent understandings of the world. This process mirrors the historical development of science, wherein hypotheses are tested against experience, refined through experimentation, and integrated into broader explanatory frameworks.

Immediate inference, or the capacity to draw conclusions directly from premises without the mediation of complex reasoning, also features in Bahá'í epistemology. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's oft-cited principle that religion must conform to reason exemplifies this mode of thought: “Religion must conform to science and reason; otherwise it is superstition” (The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 107). This assertion does not reduce religion to the current conclusions of science but affirms that rational consistency and empirical credibility are necessary criteria for religious claims to be considered valid.

Conceptual knowledge, therefore, is presented in the Bahá'í Writings as a dynamic faculty capable of elevating humanity from ignorance to understanding, provided it is exercised within the bounds of humility and aligned with higher principles. Bahá'u'lláh's exaltation of knowledge as “wings to man's life” (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 51) includes the soaring capacities of reason, yet these wings must be guided lest they lead not to ascent but to confusion or pride. This perspective echoes critiques within the Western philosophical tradition of reason detached from

ethical or spiritual grounding. The dangers of rationalism devoid of moral compass—whether in the form of utilitarian calculus, technocratic governance, or ideological absolutism—are cautioned against by Bahá'í teachings that insist knowledge must serve the ends of justice, compassion, and unity.

In contrast to the Vienna Circle's reduction of knowledge to empirically verifiable propositions, the Bahá'í view acknowledges the validity of conceptual constructions that address ethical, metaphysical, and theological questions. Where logical positivism dismissed such inquiries as meaningless, Bahá'í thought affirms their centrality to human purpose. Similarly, while Wittgenstein's later philosophy emphasized the embeddedness of meaning within language-games and forms of life, recognizing the plurality and contingency of conceptual frameworks, Bahá'í epistemology maintains that truth remains accessible through the integration of reason, experience, and divine guidance. The plurality of conceptual systems does not negate the possibility of convergence upon deeper realities, provided these systems remain open to correction and refinement through consultation, dialogue, and reflection.

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The Bahá'í Writings themselves exemplify this openness through their use of diverse modes of expression—poetic, logical, allegorical—each serving to illuminate aspects of truth. This multiplicity reflects the recognition that no single conceptual framework can exhaust the complexities of reality. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s acknowledgment of both natural and divine philosophy underscores this point: “Philosophy is of two kinds: natural and divine... Now is the time for us to make an effort and enable it to advance apace with the philosophy of material investigation” (The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 95). Here, conceptual knowledge is seen as evolving, capable of refinement and elevation through engagement with spiritual principles.

This integrative view of conceptual knowledge aligns with the Bahá'í commitment to consultation as a method of collective reasoning. Consultation encourages the free exchange of ideas, the examination of assumptions, and the pursuit of truth through mutual respect and detachment from personal opinion. It operationalizes the rational faculty within a social context, ensuring that individual reasoning is tempered by collective wisdom. In this practice, conceptual knowledge becomes not only a means of understanding but a vehicle for building unity and fostering justice within communities.

Ultimately, conceptual knowledge within the Bahá'í epistemological hierarchy serves as both a bridge and a mediator. It structures the insights of material knowledge into coherent systems, informs moral discernment, and prepares the ground for the reception of divine truths. It is through this faculty that humanity constructs its sciences, philosophies, and laws, yet its highest function lies in its capacity to recognize its own limitations and to remain open to the transformative influence of revelation. Detached from this humility, reason risks becoming a servant of ego, ideology, or domination. Integrated within a framework oriented toward spiritual and moral advancement, it becomes a powerful instrument for the discovery of reality and the advancement of civilization.

In this light, the Bahá'í typology of knowledge places ‘ilm-i tasavvurī at the heart of humanity’s intellectual and moral development. It is through this faculty that the findings of empirical inquiry are synthesized, that moral principles are discerned, and that the unity of knowledge is progressively realized. Reason, when exercised with humility and guided by higher principles, becomes a means not only of understanding the world but of transforming it in accordance with the purposes of justice, unity, and peace. In this, the Bahá'í vision affirms the dignity and nobility of the rational faculty as a divine trust, indispensable for the unfolding of human potential and the building of a spiritually grounded civilization.

Existential Knowledge (‘Ilm-i Wujūdī)

Existential knowledge (*‘ilm-i wujūdī*) refers to the immediate, direct, and unmediated awareness of one’s own existence. This form of knowledge, unlike material or conceptual knowledge, is not derived from observation, abstraction, or inference but arises from the soul’s direct consciousness of its own being. In the Bahá’í Writings, this inner awareness constitutes a foundational element of human epistemology, providing the ground upon which moral responsibility, self-recognition, and spiritual growth are built. While empirical and conceptual knowledge furnish humanity with insights about the external world and the structures of thought, existential knowledge offers a primary, non-discursive awareness through which the human being affirms its reality, recognizes its agency, and becomes capable of orientation toward higher purposes.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá points to this intrinsic awareness in His descriptions of the soul’s faculties, stating, “The mind is the power of the human spirit. Through this power man discovers the realities of things” (The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 258). This discovery includes, first and foremost, the apprehension of the self. In this immediate recognition, the individual does not arrive at the knowledge of existence through inference but experiences it as an undeniable reality. This mode of knowing aligns with what Islamic philosophy terms *‘ilm ḥuḍūrī*, or knowledge by presence, wherein the knower and the known are united in a single act of consciousness. The Bahá’í Writings reflect this tradition insofar as they emphasize the soul’s inherent faculties of perception, understanding, and volition, faculties that presuppose a fundamental self-awareness.

The philosophical foundations of existential knowledge can be traced to classical Islamic thought, particularly in the works of Avicenna and Mullā Ṣadrā. Avicenna’s famed “Flying Man” thought experiment posits a hypothetical individual created fully formed yet deprived of all sensory input. Suspended in a void, this individual would nonetheless affirm the existence of self, thus demonstrating that self-awareness precedes sensory or empirical knowledge. Mullā Ṣadrā further elaborates this notion through his doctrine of substantial motion and the primacy of existence (*aṣālat al-wujūd*), arguing that existence itself is present to the self in an immediate, non-representational mode. These insights resonate with the Bahá’í view, though Bahá’í epistemology integrates this awareness within a broader teleological and spiritual framework.

In Christian philosophy, this theme appears in Augustine’s dictum, “Noverim me, noverim Te” (“Let me know myself, that I may know Thee”), where self-knowledge becomes the gateway to the knowledge of God. Similarly, existentialist philosophers such as Kierkegaard emphasize the subjective, immediate awareness of existence as the locus of moral and spiritual awakening. For Kierkegaard, the experience of despair and the recognition of finitude compel the individual toward authentic faith and self-realization. While the Bahá’í Writings do not engage directly with these philosophical traditions, their affirmation of existential knowledge situates them within this lineage of thought that recognizes self-awareness as foundational to all further knowledge.

Within the Bahá'í framework, this awareness of self is not a static fact but a dynamic capacity through which the individual becomes conscious of moral responsibility and spiritual potential. The immediate knowledge of one's own existence grounds the capacity for ethical discernment, for it is through this awareness that the individual apprehends the distinction between right and wrong, recognizes the consequences of actions, and perceives the need for spiritual growth. 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes this moral dimension, stating, "If he becomes acquainted with the reality of man, he will comprehend the reality of Divinity" (The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 263). Here, the movement from self-awareness to awareness of the divine reflects the interdependence of existential and spiritual knowledge.

This existential awareness also underpins the Bahá'í understanding of free will and moral agency. The soul's recognition of its own existence entails the recognition of its capacity for choice, growth, and transformation. It is through this immediate knowledge that the individual becomes accountable for actions and responsible for pursuing virtues. Without this self-awareness, higher forms of knowledge—conceptual, moral, or divine—would lack their necessary foundation in the conscious, volitional subject.

Moreover, existential knowledge affirms the reality of human dignity and the nobility of the soul. Bahá'u'lláh writes, "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures" (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 259). This metaphor presupposes that within each individual resides a hidden reality awaiting discovery through conscious cultivation. Such cultivation begins with the recognition of one's own being and potential—a recognition made possible through existential knowledge. This awareness is not reducible to biological self-preservation or psychological reflex but speaks to the deeper consciousness of the soul's inherent worth and purpose.

In light of this, existential knowledge occupies a unique position within the Bahá'í hierarchy of knowing. It is not derived from external observation nor constructed through conceptual abstraction but is an immediate, inward apprehension of being. This form of knowledge provides the ground for all moral, spiritual, and intellectual development, enabling the individual to orient toward truth, cultivate virtues, and pursue the aims of spiritual advancement. Without this self-awareness, the higher aspirations of the soul would remain inaccessible, for they require a conscious subject capable of intentional action and reflective thought.

The Bahá'í Writings thus align existential knowledge with the soul's intrinsic capacity to perceive realities beyond the sensory or material. 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks of the rational soul's power to "comprehend things that are not perceptible to the senses" and to "perceive things that the outer senses cannot perceive" (Some Answered Questions, p. 146). This capacity begins with the soul's awareness of itself, extending outward to the apprehension of moral truths and spiritual realities. Such knowledge grounds the individual's journey toward recognizing the signs of God within and without, culminating in the affirmation of the divine purpose animating existence.

In this respect, existential knowledge serves as a bridge between the inner consciousness of self and the broader realities of spiritual truth. It affirms the continuity between immediate awareness and higher forms of knowing, situating the individual within a cosmological and moral order that transcends the empirical world. Through this knowledge, the individual becomes attuned to the responsibilities inherent in existence, recognizing the call to cultivate virtues, seek truth, and contribute to the betterment of the world.

Ultimately, ‘ilm-i wujūdī reveals that knowledge is not merely an external acquisition but an inner awakening. It grounds the Bahá’í understanding of the self as both rational and spiritual, capable of perceiving its own existence and recognizing its place within the divine scheme of reality. This awareness underlies the moral and spiritual imperatives of the Bahá’í Faith, affirming that knowledge begins with the self’s recognition of its own being and culminates in the conscious pursuit of unity, justice, and spiritual fulfillment.

Moral Knowledge (‘Ilm-i Akhlāqī)

Moral knowledge (‘ilm-i akhlāqī) occupies a crucial and distinctive place within the Bahá’í typology of knowledge, for it addresses not only what can be known but how knowledge must be embodied in action and character. Unlike material or conceptual knowledge, which pertain to understanding the natural world or constructing theoretical systems, moral knowledge concerns the cultivation of virtues, the refinement of conduct, and the realization of ethical principles through concrete deeds. Within the Bahá’í Writings, moral knowledge is never treated as abstract or speculative; rather, it is inseparable from the lived reality of human beings, rooted in their capacity for choice, volition, and responsibility. It is through this form of knowledge that individuals and societies progress toward the goals of justice, compassion, unity, and spiritual development.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explicitly affirms the interdependence of knowledge, volition, and action as the necessary conditions for moral accomplishment. He states, “The attainment of any object is conditioned upon knowledge, volition and action. Unless these three conditions are forthcoming, there is no execution or accomplishment” (The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 157). This triadic structure reflects a foundational principle of Bahá’í moral epistemology: that to know what is good is not sufficient unless that knowledge is wedded to will and realized through behavior. Knowledge finds its fulfillment not in contemplation alone but in its embodiment through just and virtuous action. Moral knowledge thus transcends mere theoretical understanding; it becomes performative, shaping the self and contributing to the transformation of society.

The Bahá’í Writings emphasize that the measure of knowledge’s worth lies in its fruits—its capacity to produce deeds that uplift individuals and advance the collective well-being of humanity. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “Knowledge is not merely the acquisition of facts; it must produce the fruit of good deeds” (Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, p. 156). This statement encapsulates a teleological view of knowledge wherein moral understanding is

inseparable from moral practice. Knowledge that does not lead to the betterment of character, the promotion of justice, and the service of others is deemed incomplete, even dangerous, for it risks becoming a tool of pride, exploitation, or self-interest.

This ethical imperative situates moral knowledge within a broader cosmological and spiritual vision. The purpose of human life, according to the Bahá'í Writings, is not merely to acquire information or master nature but to cultivate virtues that reflect the divine attributes and contribute to the advancement of civilization. Bahá'u'lláh writes, "The purpose of learning should be the promotion of the welfare of the people and the exaltation of the human mind and spirit" (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 168). This orientation affirms that knowledge, particularly moral knowledge, serves higher ends: the realization of human potential, the establishment of justice, and the building of unity among peoples.

In this regard, the Bahá'í conception of moral knowledge resonates with philosophical traditions that emphasize the unity of knowing and doing. In Aristotelian ethics, for example, the concept of phronesis, or practical wisdom, integrates knowledge with action, enabling individuals to discern right conduct in concrete situations. Virtue is not merely understood but enacted through habituation, leading to the flourishing of the soul and the community. Similarly, in the Confucian tradition, knowledge and moral cultivation are intertwined through the practice of ren (humaneness) and li (ritual propriety), guiding individuals toward ethical maturity and harmonious relationships. The Bahá'í Writings, while rooted in a distinct theological framework, affirm a similar principle: that moral knowledge must manifest in deeds, shaping both the individual's inner character and outward conduct.

The performative nature of moral knowledge is further underscored by the Bahá'í emphasis on the alignment of thought, word, and deed. Bahá'u'lláh admonishes, "Let deeds, not words, be your adorning" (The Hidden Words, Arabic no. 5). This call to coherence between inner knowledge and outward action reflects a rejection of hypocrisy, empty rhetoric, and mere intellectualism divorced from ethical responsibility. Knowledge acquires legitimacy and value when it results in concrete actions that reflect the virtues of truthfulness, justice, compassion, and service. This alignment transforms moral knowledge from an abstract ideal into a lived reality, shaping communities and advancing the civilization-building aims of the Bahá'í Faith.

Moral knowledge also plays a foundational role in the Bahá'í conception of education. The purpose of education is not solely the transmission of information but the cultivation of character and the nurturing of virtues. Bahá'u'lláh's metaphor of the human being as "a mine rich in gems of inestimable value" points to the latent moral capacities within each person, capacities that must be brought forth through education and the practice of virtues (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 259). This transformative process begins with knowledge of ethical principles but finds its fulfillment in their realization through action. In this light, education becomes both an intellectual and a moral endeavor, aimed at fostering individuals who contribute positively to the betterment of the world.

The social dimension of moral knowledge is equally emphasized. Bahá'í teachings on consultation, community building, and the promotion of justice reflect the belief that moral knowledge must extend beyond the individual to shape collective structures and institutions. Consultation, in particular, embodies the principle that truth emerges through collective deliberation characterized by humility, respect, and the pursuit of unity. This process not only refines understanding but cultivates virtues such as patience, detachment, and fairness. Moral knowledge thus becomes a social practice, advancing both personal transformation and collective progress.

At the heart of Bahá'í moral epistemology lies the conviction that the purpose of knowledge is to foster the conditions necessary for the spiritual and material advancement of humanity. This purpose directs individuals to align their knowledge with action, to embody the virtues they understand, and to contribute to the creation of communities founded upon principles of justice, compassion, and unity. Detached from this teleology, knowledge risks serving ego, ambition, or domination, leading to fragmentation rather than coherence, exploitation rather than justice.

In this light, 'ilm-i akhlāqī functions within the Bahá'í hierarchy of knowledge as both a culmination and a bridge. It builds upon the awareness of self ('ilm-i wujūdī) and the abstractions of reason ('ilm-i tasavvurī), translating understanding into action. At the same time, it prepares the soul for the reception of higher forms of knowledge, aligning conduct with the spiritual laws revealed through divine guidance. Without moral knowledge, the ascent toward spiritual realization remains incomplete, for it is through the practice of virtues that the soul refines its capacities, draws nearer to the divine, and fulfills its purpose.

Ultimately, the Bahá'í vision of moral knowledge reaffirms the unity of knowledge and action, thought and deed, understanding and embodiment. It rejects any dichotomy between the intellectual and the ethical, insisting that true knowledge finds its highest expression in the cultivation of virtues and the service of humanity. In this, 'ilm-i akhlāqī stands as a vital component of the Bahá'í epistemological framework, ensuring that the pursuit of knowledge remains oriented toward the betterment of both the individual soul and the collective life of humanity.

Divine Knowledge ('Ilm-i Ilāhī)

Divine knowledge ('ilm-i ilāhī) represents a distinct and elevated category within the Bahá'í typology of knowledge. It pertains to the truths that are disclosed to humanity not through empirical observation or rational deduction but through the agency of the Manifestations of God—those unique figures who, according to Bahá'í theology, act as the channels through which divine wisdom and guidance are progressively revealed across the span of human history. This category of knowledge stands apart from the preceding forms not because it contradicts them but because it transcends their limitations, offering insights into the metaphysical realities, moral principles, and ultimate purposes of existence that are inaccessible to unaided human reason or the methods of material science.

Bahá'u'lláh affirms that the source of all true knowledge lies in divine revelation, stating unequivocally: “The source of all learning is the knowledge of God, exalted be His glory, and this cannot be attained save through the knowledge of His Divine Manifestation” (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 156). This pronouncement establishes a hierarchy of knowledge in which divine revelation serves as the ultimate criterion and foundation for all other forms of understanding. While humanity may advance in its comprehension of the natural world or in its philosophical and moral reflections, these endeavors find their orientation, confirmation, and completion through the truths revealed by the Manifestations of God.

The function of divine knowledge is not merely to augment human understanding but to transform the moral and spiritual capacities of individuals and societies. The laws, teachings, and principles conveyed through revelation provide the framework for the cultivation of virtues, the establishment of just social structures, and the realization of humanity's potential. This knowledge is inherently teleological, oriented toward the advancement of civilization, the promotion of unity, and the spiritual maturation of the human soul. Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, in particular, is presented as a response to the exigencies of the present age, offering principles such as the oneness of humanity, the harmony of science and religion, and the imperative of justice as the foundation for a new world order.

In distinguishing divine knowledge from other forms, the Bahá'í Writings emphasize both its origin and its function. Unlike material knowledge, which concerns the outward appearances of things, or conceptual knowledge, which arises from human reasoning, divine knowledge originates from a transcendent source beyond the human mind and is mediated through the person of the Manifestation. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá describes the Manifestations as possessing immediate and comprehensive awareness of spiritual realities, unmediated by the processes of discursive reasoning: “These Manifestations of God have a universal consciousness, a universal mind... they comprehend all things, and their knowledge is divine, not acquired” (Some Answered Questions, pp. 206–207). This intrinsic knowledge enables them to articulate principles that anticipate the future needs of humanity and to provide guidance that remains relevant despite the limitations of human understanding.

The revelatory nature of divine knowledge implies a progressive unfolding. Bahá'í theology rejects the notion of a static or final revelation, affirming instead that the knowledge imparted through the Manifestations is adapted to the evolving capacities and conditions of humanity. Each dispensation brings teachings suited to its time while preparing the ground for future advancements. This principle of progressive revelation underscores the dynamic relationship between divine knowledge and human history. It situates religious truth within a temporal unfolding, where each stage offers further clarity and guidance while remaining part of a coherent, divinely orchestrated process.

Divine knowledge, therefore, serves multiple functions within the Bahá'í epistemological framework. It provides ontological knowledge concerning the nature of God, creation, and the

human soul; it offers moral knowledge regarding the virtues and principles necessary for individual and collective flourishing; and it supplies teleological knowledge that orients humanity toward its ultimate purpose and destiny. This comprehensive scope distinguishes ‘ilm-i ilāhī from the partial and provisional insights obtainable through other means.

In contrast to philosophical systems that have sought to derive knowledge of ultimate reality through reason alone, the Bahá’í Writings assert that such efforts, while valuable within their sphere, are ultimately insufficient. Human reason, constrained by cultural, historical, and individual limitations, cannot by itself penetrate the mysteries of existence or prescribe the means for humanity’s spiritual and social advancement. Divine revelation, by contrast, offers knowledge that is both universal in its source and particular in its application, addressing the needs of humanity within specific historical contexts while pointing beyond them to enduring spiritual truths.

This view places Bahá’í epistemology at odds with both the skepticism of modern epistemology and the foundationalism of certain philosophical traditions. Against the skepticism that denies the possibility of universal truths, the Bahá’í Writings affirm the accessibility of such truths through revelation. Against the foundationalism that seeks immutable principles through unaided reason, they assert the necessity of divine guidance to disclose realities beyond human reach. In this sense, ‘ilm-i ilāhī functions as a corrective and complement to the limitations of other epistemic modes, ensuring that the pursuit of knowledge remains aligned with the purposes of justice, unity, and spiritual growth.

Moreover, the relationship between divine knowledge and human knowledge is not antagonistic but integrative. The Bahá’í principle of the harmony of science and religion reflects this integration, affirming that truths revealed through science and reason must ultimately harmonize with those disclosed through revelation. Apparent conflicts arise from human error—whether in scientific conclusions or religious interpretations—not from any fundamental discord between these domains. Divine knowledge offers the overarching framework within which scientific and philosophical inquiries find their proper place and orientation.

In this light, ‘ilm-i ilāhī anchors the Bahá’í epistemological hierarchy. It ensures that the various domains of human inquiry—material, conceptual, existential, and moral—are directed toward their true ends. It provides the spiritual laws and moral principles necessary for the responsible use of knowledge, guiding humanity away from the dangers of reductionism, relativism, or technological domination. It affirms that knowledge is not an end in itself but a means to achieve the divine purpose for humanity: the cultivation of virtues, the establishment of justice, and the realization of unity.

Ultimately, divine knowledge reorients epistemology from a merely descriptive or explanatory enterprise to a transformative one. It calls humanity not only to understand but to become—to embody the principles of compassion, justice, and service that reflect the divine attributes. Through the guidance of the Manifestations, humanity is invited into a participatory relationship

with the unfolding of divine will, contributing to the advancement of civilization and the fulfillment of spiritual potential. In this, ‘ilm-i ilāhī stands as the crown of human knowledge, offering both the light and the path by which humanity may attain its destined maturity.

Intrinsic Divine Knowledge (‘Ilm-i Dhātī-yi Ilāhī)

Intrinsic divine knowledge (‘ilm-i dhātī-yi ilāhī) occupies a position of absolute transcendence within the Bahá’í typology of knowledge. It refers not to the knowledge revealed to humanity through the Manifestations of God—what has been identified as divine knowledge (‘ilm-i ilāhī)—but to the eternal, uncreated, and infinite knowledge possessed inherently by God Himself. This knowledge is coextensive with the divine essence, inseparable from God’s being, and fundamentally inaccessible to the created mind. In Bahá’í theology, this intrinsic knowledge transcends all human categories of understanding, defies all attempts at conceptualization, and lies beyond the reach of both reason and revelation insofar as it pertains to the unknowable essence of God.

Bahá’u’lláh affirms the absolute transcendence of God’s knowledge in unequivocal terms, declaring, “To every discerning and illumined heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the Divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute... He is and hath ever been veiled in the ancient eternity of His Essence, and will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men” (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, no. XXVI). This passage situates intrinsic divine knowledge beyond the horizon of human comprehension, establishing a radical ontological distinction between Creator and creation. While humanity may attain knowledge of God’s attributes, laws, and will through His Manifestations, the essential reality of God—along with the knowledge that subsists within that essence—remains forever veiled.

This conception aligns with classical theological doctrines concerning divine omniscience in both Islamic and Christian traditions. In Islamic theology, God’s knowledge is characterized as eternal, unchanging, and encompassing all realities, past, present, and future. Distinctions are often drawn between essential knowledge (‘ilm dhātī) and knowledge in act (‘ilm fi’lī), the former pertaining to God’s intrinsic awareness and the latter to the manifestation of this knowledge in the order of creation. Similarly, in Christian theology, God’s omniscience is understood as perfect, eternal, and immediate, encompassing all things without succession or change. The Bahá’í Writings affirm these traditional attributes while emphasizing the utter incomparability and transcendence of God’s essence, thereby safeguarding the mystery and sanctity of the divine being.

The implications of intrinsic divine knowledge for Bahá’í epistemology are profound. This knowledge is not acquired, progressive, or discursive; it is immediate, inherent, and absolute. It does not operate within the categories of human understanding—cause and effect, subject and object, potentiality and actuality—but subsists beyond all such limitations. As such, it stands as the ontological ground for all other forms of knowledge. All created knowledge, whether

material, conceptual, existential, moral, or even the knowledge revealed through the Manifestations, derives ultimately from this inexhaustible source. Yet this derivation does not imply comprehension of the source itself. Humanity may partake of the rays of divine knowledge, but the sun of that knowledge remains forever beyond approach.

Bahá'u'lláh's assertion that "the source of all learning is the knowledge of God" (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 156) must be understood in this light. While human beings can receive knowledge through revelation and through the faculties bestowed upon them, the essential knowledge of God remains utterly beyond human grasp. This epistemological humility protects Bahá'í thought from the errors of theological speculation that presume to map the inner workings of the divine mind. It establishes clear boundaries for human inquiry, affirming the legitimacy and necessity of striving for knowledge while recognizing the ultimate limits imposed by the ontological gulf between Creator and creation.

The relationship between intrinsic divine knowledge and the revealed knowledge of the Manifestations is thus asymmetrical but complementary. The Manifestations, in Bahá'í theology, possess perfect knowledge of spiritual realities appropriate to their station and dispense this knowledge progressively to humanity. Yet even their knowledge, as revealed to humankind, reflects the limitations of human capacity and historical circumstance. It is tailored to the needs of a given age and adapted to the evolving capacities of humanity. Intrinsic divine knowledge, by contrast, is absolute and undivided, encompassing all possible realities beyond time, space, and contingency. While revelation serves as the bridge between the human and the divine, intrinsic knowledge remains on the far shore, forever veiled in the sanctity of God's unknowable essence.

This distinction has further implications for the Bahá'í view of religious language and metaphysics. All human descriptions of God, however exalted, are necessarily symbolic, approximate, and metaphorical. The attributes ascribed to God—knowledge, power, mercy, justice—are reflections within the world of creation of qualities that, in their divine reality, surpass human understanding. As Bahá'u'lláh writes, "All that ye can understand and perceive is but the outward form, and not the inner reality, of those things" (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, no. XXVI). This recognition instills in the Bahá'í epistemology a profound humility, acknowledging the provisional and analogical nature of human conceptions of the divine.

Yet this humility does not lead to skepticism or agnosticism regarding religious truth. Rather, it grounds the Bahá'í affirmation of progressive revelation, wherein God discloses through His Manifestations the knowledge necessary for humanity's spiritual and moral advancement, while His intrinsic knowledge remains untouched and unapproachable. This dual aspect—revelation accessible and essence unknowable—ensures that faith remains both engaged with the realities of the world and oriented toward the mystery of the divine. It preserves the dynamism of religious knowledge while maintaining reverence for the transcendence of its ultimate source.

In situating ‘ilm-i dhātī-yi ilāhī at the summit of its epistemological hierarchy, the Bahá’í Faith affirms a vision of reality structured by gradations of knowledge, each appropriate to its station and function. Material, conceptual, existential, moral, and revealed knowledge operate within the sphere of creation, guiding humanity toward its purpose. Intrinsic divine knowledge, however, stands beyond this sphere, the eternal wellspring from which all reality flows but which remains forever beyond human comprehension. This hierarchy reflects not only the limits of human knowing but also the generosity of divine guidance, which provides humanity with the means to approach truth, cultivate virtues, and participate in the unfolding of civilization, while preserving the sanctity and transcendence of God’s essential reality.

In this light, intrinsic divine knowledge serves as the ontological foundation for the unity of knowledge affirmed in the Bahá’í Writings. It guarantees that the pursuit of truth—whether through science, philosophy, or religion—is not a mere human construct but a response to the deeper reality of existence, a reality rooted in the eternal, unknowable knowledge of God. This vision reconciles the human thirst for understanding with the humility appropriate to finite beings, offering a framework in which knowledge serves not only to explain the world but to align humanity with its higher purposes, oriented always toward the divine source from which all knowledge ultimately proceeds.

True Knowledge in Conformity with Reality (‘Ilm-i Ḥaqīqī Muṭābiq ba Wāqī‘)

The seventh and culminating category within the Bahá’í typology of knowledge is true knowledge in conformity with reality (‘ilm-i ḥaqīqī muṭābiq ba wāqī‘). This epistemological ideal synthesizes the various modes of knowing—material, conceptual, existential, moral, and divine—into a unified apprehension of reality as it truly is. It signifies not only the accuracy of knowledge in correspondence with facts but the attainment of a deeper harmony between human understanding and the ontological structure of existence. This conception of knowledge transcends the mere acquisition of correct propositions; it encompasses the alignment of the human mind and soul with truth in its fullest, most integrative sense.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá articulates this principle with clarity, stating, “Any religious belief which is not conformable to scientific proof and investigation is superstition, for true science is reason and reality, and religion is essentially reality and truth; therefore, the two must correspond” (The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 63). This correspondence is not merely a logical or empirical relation but reflects a deeper ontological unity between the faculties of human understanding and the realities of the world and spirit. Knowledge, to be considered true in the Bahá’í sense, must conform not only to the observable phenomena of the material world but to the moral and spiritual dimensions that underpin existence.

The concept of knowledge’s conformity to reality recalls the classical correspondence theory of truth, rooted in Aristotelian and Thomistic thought, wherein truth consists in the alignment of the intellect with reality (*adaequatio intellectus et rei*). However, the Bahá’í understanding extends beyond this framework to encompass the moral and teleological dimensions of knowledge.

Knowledge is not regarded as an end in itself but as a means to fulfill humanity's spiritual and social potential. In this light, true knowledge serves both descriptive and prescriptive functions: it reveals the nature of things and directs human beings toward their highest good.

This integrative vision reconciles the domains of science and religion, reason and revelation, by affirming that truth cannot be compartmentalized or fragmented without distorting its reality. Bahá'í epistemology maintains that the apparent conflicts between these domains arise from human error—whether through the misapplication of scientific methods beyond their proper sphere or the misinterpretation of religious teachings rooted in outdated cultural assumptions. In reality, science and religion, reason and faith, operate as complementary avenues toward a unified truth. Bahá'u'lláh affirms this unity, stating, “The purpose of learning should be the promotion of the welfare of the people and the exaltation of the human mind and spirit” (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 168). This statement positions knowledge within a teleological framework oriented toward human flourishing and spiritual advancement.

True knowledge, in this sense, is not limited to the accurate representation of external phenomena but extends to the inner realities of moral and spiritual life. It encompasses an understanding of the principles that govern existence, the recognition of humanity's responsibilities, and the realization of the divine purposes that animate creation. This comprehensive scope distinguishes *'ilm-i ḥaqīqī muṭābiq ba wāqī'* from the partial and provisional forms of knowledge that characterize material and conceptual inquiry. While these forms contribute to the construction of scientific and philosophical systems, they achieve their fulfillment only when integrated within a broader understanding aligned with reality's moral and spiritual dimensions.

In this context, contemporary theories such as interdisciplinarity and complexity theory provide useful philosophical analogies for understanding the nature of this integrative epistemology. Interdisciplinary mastery recognizes that no single domain—whether empirical science, philosophy, ethics, or theology—can yield a comprehensive picture of reality in isolation. Rather, a true understanding of complex systems requires the integration of diverse perspectives and methods, each illuminating different aspects of a multifaceted whole. Complexity theory further suggests that reality itself is characterized by non-linearity, interdependence, emergence, and dynamic systems, necessitating modes of inquiry that are equally integrative and adaptive. In this light, the Bahá'í conception of true knowledge can be seen as a metaphysical and epistemological affirmation of this integrative principle: reality demands that the various faculties of human knowing be harmonized to achieve a fuller, more adequate apprehension of truth.

Thus, this seventh category functions not as an independent method but as the culmination and synthesis of the preceding five accessible modes of knowledge—material, conceptual, existential, moral, and revealed. Intrinsic divine knowledge remains forever beyond integration, as it belongs solely to the unknowable essence of God. Yet the other forms of knowledge find

their coherence and higher purpose within this final category. True knowledge emerges when these diverse faculties operate in concert, each fulfilling its function within an overarching framework oriented toward reality's unity.

The harmony of science and religion, a central principle of Bahá'í thought, finds its fullest expression in this ideal of true knowledge. Science reveals the mechanisms of the material world; religion discloses the purposes and moral laws that guide humanity's use of this knowledge. Together, they enable a holistic understanding that aligns human endeavors with the realities of both the seen and unseen worlds. 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes this point: "Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress" (Paris Talks, p. 143). This metaphor captures the necessity of integrating empirical investigation with spiritual insight to achieve a balanced and comprehensive apprehension of reality.

The culmination of knowledge in conformity with reality also affirms the possibility of unity within diversity. While human beings approach knowledge through various disciplines, cultures, and traditions, the Bahá'í Writings maintain that truth remains one. Diversity in expression, methodology, and perspective enriches the pursuit of knowledge but does not imply relativism or the impossibility of convergence. On the contrary, the principle of unity in diversity suggests that the integration of diverse approaches leads to a more complete and nuanced understanding of reality. This integrative process reflects the Bahá'í vision of a global civilization where science, religion, and culture contribute harmoniously to the advancement of humanity.

At its deepest level, true knowledge in conformity with reality is not merely cognitive but transformative. It requires the alignment of thought, will, and action with truth, resulting in the cultivation of virtues, the establishment of justice, and the promotion of unity. Knowledge, in this sense, becomes an instrument of spiritual development and social progress. It leads to the recognition of humanity's interconnectedness, the necessity of service to others, and the centrality of moral principles in guiding technological and scientific advancements.

The Bahá'í Writings caution against the dangers of knowledge severed from moral and spiritual foundations. Without such grounding, knowledge risks becoming a tool of exploitation, manipulation, or domination. The history of science and technology demonstrates that advances in knowledge do not necessarily correlate with moral progress. The alignment of knowledge with reality, therefore, entails more than factual accuracy; it demands a commitment to the ethical application of knowledge in service of the common good.

In this light, *'ilm-i ḥaqīqī muṭābiq ba wāqī'* serves as both the criterion and the goal of the Bahá'í epistemological hierarchy. It integrates the empirical precision of material knowledge, the abstractions of conceptual reasoning, the immediacy of existential awareness, the imperatives of moral understanding, and the guidance of divine revelation. It points toward a holistic epistemology where knowledge is valued not for its own sake but for its capacity to align

humanity with the realities of existence and to advance the purposes of unity, justice, and spiritual growth.

Ultimately, this conception of knowledge reflects the Bahá'í conviction that reality is coherent, that truth is accessible, and that humanity is capable of aligning its understanding and actions with the deeper purposes of existence. This vision stands as a response to the epistemic fragmentation characteristic of modernity, offering a framework in which the pursuit of knowledge is unified by its orientation toward reality and its service to the higher aspirations of the human spirit.

Conclusion

The typology of knowledge articulated within the Bahá'í Writings offers a comprehensive and integrative framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of human epistemic experience. This typology, encompassing material, conceptual, existential, moral, divine, intrinsic divine, and ultimately true knowledge in conformity with reality, presents a hierarchical yet harmonious vision of how humanity can progressively approach truth. It affirms the legitimacy and necessity of empirical inquiry, the creative power of reason, the foundational awareness of the self, the moral imperatives of action, and the guidance of divine revelation, while situating all these within a teleological structure oriented toward the realization of human potential and the fulfillment of spiritual purposes.

Throughout this exploration, it has become evident that the Bahá'í conception of knowledge does not advocate for the supremacy of one domain over others but insists upon their integration in service to a unified and coherent apprehension of reality. The inclusion of complexity theory and interdisciplinary mastery as analogues within the contemporary philosophical landscape further illuminates the relevance and robustness of this epistemological model. Just as complex systems require the convergence of diverse perspectives to be adequately understood, so too does the Bahá'í vision of knowledge affirm that truth is best approached through the integration of the various faculties of human understanding.

This holistic approach stands as a counterpoint to the epistemic fragmentation characteristic of much of modern thought. It rejects both the reductionism of scientism, which confines knowledge to the empirical and the measurable, and the skepticism of postmodern relativism, which denies the possibility of coherent truth. Instead, it upholds the principle that reality is ultimately one, that knowledge can approach this unity through the harmonious application of diverse methods, and that such knowledge must serve moral and spiritual ends. The teleological dimension of this framework—its orientation toward justice, unity, and spiritual growth—distinguishes it from merely descriptive or instrumentalist epistemologies. Knowledge, in the Bahá'í view, is not an end in itself but a means toward the advancement of civilization and the refinement of the soul.

By elucidating this typology, this article contributes to a more precise understanding of Bahá'í epistemology, clarifying the roles and relationships of different forms of knowledge within a coherent and purposive vision. It demonstrates that the Bahá'í Faith offers not merely a set of theological doctrines but a comprehensive philosophy of knowledge that engages with enduring questions concerning the nature of truth, the capacities of human understanding, and the purposes of learning. In doing so, it opens pathways for further dialogue between Bahá'í thought and contemporary epistemological discourse, particularly in fields concerned with the integration of science, ethics, and spirituality.

The exploration of these seven categories affirms the Bahá'í commitment to the unity of knowledge, the harmony of science and religion, and the centrality of moral and spiritual development in the pursuit of truth. It underscores the conviction that humanity's quest for understanding must be grounded in humility, guided by principles of justice and compassion, and oriented toward the betterment of the world. In this, the Bahá'í typology of knowledge not only maps the terrain of human knowing but points toward the horizon of its highest possibilities.

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