

## Question

Many people believe that the soul is equivalent to consciousness that resides somewhere in the brain. What is the Bahá'í view on it? *Sylwia Kurpie*

## Dr. Penn's Response

My understanding of the Bahá'í perspective on this question is that properties or capacities may exist in the world in three ways. Properties or capacities may exist by composition, by emergence, or by reflection.

All non-organic phenomena, for example, exist by the composition of elements. So long as the necessary elements are brought together in the right proportion, the properties and powers that are associated with the phenomenon under consideration are revealed. The properties of water, for example, exist because of the union of hydrogen and oxygen in the proper proportion. As soon as this balance of elements is disrupted, all of the properties of water disappear. This is what is meant by existence by composition.

Organic matter – that is, living things – exist both by composition and by emergence. 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives this example. He notes that if we have the seed of a rose and we plant it and satisfy its varied needs, gradually, over time, the form, color, and fragrance of the rose will begin to appear. The capacities of the rose do not come forth all at once – such as we see with the capacities of water. To the contrary, they emerge gradually as a consequence of the intermingling of the various forces of nature with the inherent capacities of the seed.

Of all organic phenomena, the human person is the most complex. Indeed, the natural sciences have found that the human brain is the most complex physical entity in the known universe. The Bahá'í writings agree with the neurosciences in affirming that the properties of the human brain exist by composition and by emergence. That is, the capacities of consciousness that are associated with the human brain have evolved and developed over an extensive span of time until it has reached its current perfection.

'Abdu'l-Bahá notes, however, that the capacities of the human mind are partly natural and partly the result of the operation of spiritual forces. That is, the writings suggest that the special capacities for reasoning and for abstraction that have enabled human beings to discover the mysteries of

nature, to invent sciences and industries, to produce literature, to engage in philosophical discourse, and to develop a consciousness of the sacred are not solely the result of the composition or evolution of organic matter. Rather, He suggests that the properties of the human mind are a reflection of the unique powers associated with the human soul.

For example, in his written correspondence with the famed psychiatrist – Dr. Auguste Forel – ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has explained that the human person embodies a range of powers and capacities that are found nowhere else in nature. If one wishes to argue that these capacities are nothing more than the result of the operation of the forces of nature, such a claim would be illogical because an effect of nature (the human being) cannot embody perfections (or capacities) of which the whole of nature is itself deprived.

Since human beings embody powers of awareness that are found nowhere else in the natural world, these powers must have their origins in another source. That source ‘Abdu’l-Bahá identifies with the human soul – which He says is a heavenly power.

In a range of works, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá goes further to explain that when it is healthy and well-developed the human mind, which is a reflection of the union of the human brain with the human soul, manifests capacities of consciousness—such as the capacity for science, philosophy, the creation of arts and technologies, and so forth—that are not merely the by-product of the composition of organic matter; nor do these capacities result solely from processes of evolution and development. Rather, they are reflections of spiritual forces that may be revealed in human life in much the same way that light may be reflected in a mirror. The light that shines in a mirror is not the by-product of the composition of the mirror. The mirror is simply the vehicle through which the properties of light may be reflected.

In a similar way, the brain and body are the vehicles through which the unique powers of the human soul may be revealed.

The [Tablet to August Forel](#) is readily available. In addition, [Some Answered Questions](#) and [Paris Talks](#) are additional volumes that contain beautiful and accessible discourses on these themes. I encourage those who are interested in these matters to turn to these original sources.

*Michael Penn, August 2017*