

Beyond Welfare: A Preliminary Bahá'í Normative Framework for Economic Rights and Responsibilities¹

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Abstract

Invoking a broad catalog of applicable Bahá'í principles, this paper presents the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of a Bahá'í approach to economic growth and disparity and then maps these concepts onto an applied framework of economic rights and responsibilities. The framework that emerges thus both conceptualizes the underlying virtues that govern economic prosperity in a Bahá'í model and shows how these principles might lead to normative prescriptions for economic rights and responsibilities. The paper concludes that the Bahá'í principles dealing with economic prosperity expand the theory and practice of economic justice and give rise to individual and institutional rights and responsibilities that go beyond the imperatives of conventional models of welfare.

Résumé

S'appuyant sur un large éventail de principes bahá'ís pertinents, l'auteur présente les

fondements conceptuels et théoriques d'une approche bahá'ie de la croissance et des disparités économiques, puis transpose ces concepts dans un cadre applicable de droits et de responsabilités économiques. Le cadre qui en résulte permet à la fois de conceptualiser les vertus sous-jacentes qui régissent la prospérité économique dans un modèle bahá'í et de montrer comment ces principes peuvent mener à l'établissement de prescriptions normatives en matière de droits et de responsabilités économiques. L'auteur conclut que les principes bahá'ís relatifs à la prospérité économique élargissent la théorie et la pratique de la justice économique et donnent lieu à des droits et responsabilités individuels et institutionnels qui vont au-delà des impératifs des modèles conventionnels en matière de bien-être.

Resumen

Refiriéndose a un amplio catálogo de principios Bahá'í aplicables, este artículo presenta los fundamentos conceptuales y teóricos de un enfoque bahá'í del crecimiento económico y la desigualdad y luego mapea estos conceptos en un marco conceptual práctico de derechos y responsabilidades económicas. El marco que emerge así conceptualiza las virtudes subyacentes que gobiernan la prosperidad económica en un modelo bahá'í y muestra como estos principios pueden conducir a propuestas normativas de derechos y responsabilidades económicas. El artículo concluye que los principios bahá'í que tratan con la prosperidad económica amplían la teoría y la práctica de la justicia económica y dan lugar a derechos y responsabilidades individuales e institucionales que van más allá de los imperativos de los modelos convencionales de bienestar.

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INTRODUCTION:
BAHÁ'Í ECONOMICS

In a world in which economic interdependence is an inescapable reality, the concentration and over-accumulation of wealth have been the cause of excessive disparity between rich and poor. This unequal distribution of wealth keeps the world in a state of social and economic instability. The world's political and religious leaders, as well as its philosophers and scholars, have not found a solution to this acute disorder, which, if left unchecked, could cause strikes, wars, and much destruction ('Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd. in *Star of the West* 82–84), and threaten the democratic order (Piketty 571).

While Bahá'ís generally recognize the importance of applying the practical tools of economic policy—an essentially technical matter—in addressing problems of this kind, they do not believe that humanity can find relief from its economic maladies through such means alone. The Universal House of Justice asserts that insofar as “there is an inherent moral dimension to the generation, distribution, and utilization of wealth and resources” (1 Mar. 2017), the solution to the excessive wealth disparity “calls for the combined application of spiritual, moral and practical approaches” (*Promise of World Peace*). The Bahá'í Faith thus introduces spiritual principles and establishes mechanisms and institutions that bring oneness, justice, detachment, generosity, and prosperity to bear on the economy. It provides a

framework for guiding the establishment of the future economic order. Central to that framework is the belief that a transformation of the virtues of individuals and of the patterns of thought and behavior that give those virtues collective expression in society together help reconceptualize the relationships between the individual, society, and institutions—understood to be the protagonists of the economy.

To this end, this paper first examines the underlying virtues that govern the process of translating the Bahá'í laws, principles, and teachings into a future Bahá'í economic system. It then identifies universal concepts of practical import that constitute a Bahá'í normative framework for economic rights and responsibilities and guide the Bahá'í approach to economic prosperity. It invites a popular endorsement of these norms as the prerequisite for the emergence of a shared ethic which would ultimately herald the advent of a new economic order.

As will be shown, standard economic models view welfare as the satisfaction of preferences and the maximization of utility and profit. Likewise, conventional conceptions of justice, within which the theories of welfare are traditionally developed, limit the scope of justice to the protection and satisfaction of rights. These views do not encompass the entirety of the Bahá'í vision of prosperity. The Bahá'í writings present a framework of standards within which questions of economic justice can be considered. By including non-rights-based

measures, as well as the principle of generosity, this framework broadens both the domain within which economic justice must be applied, and the range of implications of economic justice. The framework, similarly, expands the definition of welfare and widens the base of ensuing constitutional guarantees. It reconceptualizes wealth, prosperity, and economic activity in a manner that not only satisfies the requirements of justice but is also supported by concepts, principles, obligations, values, norms, practices, and individual imperatives that go beyond justice. This paper concludes that the individual and institutional rights and responsibilities prescribed by the Bahá'í framework for economic prosperity go beyond the imperatives of the conventional models of welfare.

The following propositions should not be seen as an attempt to encompass the breadth and depth of the Bahá'í teachings within a narrow framework that is the product of a limited understanding of current realities and requirements. They should rather be viewed as an effort to bring these teachings—the full application and implications of which only future generations will appraise—one step closer to a practical reality. As the collective understanding of the Bahá'í teachings as well as the needs and realities of the global economy evolve, so should the frameworks that conceptualize prosperity and prescribe the outcome of economic activity and public policy.

OVERVIEW

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá introduced the elements of a solution to the twofold question of economic progress and the extremes of wealth and poverty. Their rationale for this global solution was not growing globalization, increasing economic interdependence, or strengthening international civil society; it was, rather, Their belief in the oneness of humankind, of which these are manifestations. Their teachings stressed that each member of the human race is born into the world as a trust of the whole, and that this trusteeship constitutes the moral foundation of economic rights and responsibilities (Bahá'í International Community).

The foundations of the Bahá'í economic teachings are laid in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the Mother Book of the Bahá'í Faith, for instance, Bahá'u'lláh introduces provisions that establish the spiritual foundation of economic progress and prosperity, train progressive communities that engage in social and economic development, and address the development of the economy through several principles and laws. These include the law of inheritance (§§ 20–26) with provisions for investment in trade and business to secure the future of children, profit-sharing as remuneration for wealth management services (§ 27), and settlement of debts (§ 28); engagement in some occupation, such as a craft, trade, or the like, and exalting

such work to the rank of worship (¶ 33); prohibition of idleness and mendicancy (¶¶ 33, 147); transiency of the material world and detachment from one's possessions (¶ 40); use of charitable endowments (¶ 42); obligatory education for children with provisions for the role of local institutions (¶ 48); fines (¶ 52); inherent oneness of mankind and trusteeship (¶ 58); abolishing slavery (¶ 72); fixing one's gaze on the eternal life of the spirit and detachment from this world (¶ 79); obedience to the government (¶ 95); *Huqúqu'lláh* (the Right of God) (¶ 97); writing of a will (¶ 109); confirming material means for progress (¶ 113); the imperative of balancing liberty and protection (¶ 124); and payment of *Zakát* (tithes) to purify means of sustenance (¶ 146). Elsewhere, Bahá'u'lláh addresses the acquisition of wealth through crafts or professions (*Tablets* 35); trustworthiness as the basis of wealth and prosperity (37); provision of rewards due to people (38); moderation in all matters and the evil of excess (69); the need for a treaty to abolish war so people may be relieved from the burden of exorbitant expenditures (89); a children's education fund (90); the importance of charity and benevolence (94); and the permissibility of charging interest on lending (133). The Bahá'í teachings also institute a "progressive income tax, a high death duty and consultation in industry between capital and labour" (Shoghi Effendi 64).

The Bahá'í writings do not outline the elements of a detailed economic system. They, however, promote

spiritual principles that call for a reorganization of human society in which economic relationships are readjusted and the role of various professions in the generation, distribution, and utilization of wealth are re-evaluated accordingly.² These Bahá'í principles include collaboration and mutual support rooted in the belief that one cannot attend to all of one's needs alone; equality in human rights notwithstanding natural distinctions among the people; and sharing and sacrifice—not equality—in individual relationships. This reorganization, readjustment, and re-evaluation begins with a renewed view of wealth and prosperity.

WEALTH

The Bahá'í view of wealth and economic activity stands in sharp contrast to dominant theories of human conduct, such as assumptions that portray human beings as self-interested agents seeking to maximize their utility and profit and "striving to claim an ever-greater share of the world's material resources" (Universal House of Justice, 1 Mar. 2017). This, however, does not suggest that wealth is denounced as intrinsically objectionable or immoral (1 Mar. 2017) or that poverty is commended and cherished ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret* 29). On the contrary, all are commanded to engage in a profession or trade. Wealth is commendable and

2 In this light, the Bahá'í Writings laud the contribution that craftsmen (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 38), teachers (39, 51–52), and farmers (90) make to the economy and to society's prosperity.

praiseworthy, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “if it is acquired by an individual’s own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry,” “if it is dedicated to the welfare of society” and “for philanthropic purposes,” and “provided the entire population is wealthy” (*Secret* 29).

PROSPERITY

There is similarly a marked divergence between the Bahá’í view of prosperity and prevailing assumptions that seek happiness in consumption, acquisition, and possession, that neglect our collective future responsibilities, that fuel self-interest and personal entitlement, and that lead to indifference to the suffering experienced by others (Universal House of Justice, 1 Mar. 2017). In addressing the ever-widening gap between rich and poor, such materialistic views usually invite materialistic methods and solutions that emphasize technical manipulation rather than moral and spiritual transformation.

The Bahá’í vision of prosperity poses a challenge to two extreme assumptions that shape contemporary discourse. On the one hand, it introduces purity of motive and action—not self-interest—as the foundation of prosperity; it asserts that collaboration—not competition—drives performance and true progress; and it views the individual’s worth in terms of service and virtue—not accumulation of wealth and consumption (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 138). On the other hand, it prohibits asceticism and does not dismiss

wealth as “inherently distasteful or immoral” (Universal House of Justice, 1 Mar. 2017). Similarly, it neither advocates that all the poor should become rich, nor does it propose that the rich and the poor should have an equal amount of wealth. It rather suggests that through a universal application of spiritual, moral, and practical remedies, poverty will decrease and no one will remain deprived of basic necessities and a comfortable life, access to which is considered a human right in the Bahá’í teaching (*Paris Talks* nos. 40, 46). However, since ability, capacity, intelligence, and power are the causes of natural distinction and vary among the people, they will not be equal in talent, learning, and skill. A natural distinction in stations—distinction based on merit, not distinction that leads to unwarranted disparity—leads to a natural emergence of ranks and positions in society. Ranks, positions, or degrees that allow for individual mobility and do not perpetuate a stagnant system of hierarchy are essential to organization and order in the world of creation. Likening the world of humanity to a great army, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that generals, captains, under-officers, and soldiers, each with their own appointed duties, are necessary for its proper functioning. Just as an army cannot be composed of only generals, or of soldiers without anyone in authority, order and organization of the economy also necessitate the existence of ranks and degrees (*Paris Talks* no. 46; Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* nos. 1865, 1867).

The Bahá'í teachings stress that the extremes of wealth and poverty must be abolished, that all must be equal before the law, and that all must enjoy equal opportunities for economic progress. Nevertheless, owing to the intrinsic differences in intelligence, wisdom, and capacity, even people of the same age with equal stations at birth who are subject to the same opportunities in education, nutrition, environment, and care, manifest different degrees of capability, advancement, and material progress ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* no. 37) and occupy various ranks and positions on the social and economic ladder. The Bahá'í teachings do not seek to break down these differences in rank and position or equalize property and the conditions of life in society ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* no. 46). They preserve the natural distinctions in social and economic station, which is conducive to the protection of order and organization in society, but emphasize that in the ranks and positions that emerge, all must be able to live in the greatest happiness ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* no. 60). The natural differences in intelligence and capacity, moreover, must not disadvantage some people. As will be shown, vast differences in capacity, and consequently the ability to produce and contribute to the economy, shall be adjusted through a taxation that is proportionate to capacity and production (no. 77).

The Bahá'í teachings on economic activity and collective prosperity can be considered from the standpoint of the insights they provide into two

interrelated global economic questions: economic progress and economic disparity. The economic teachings of the Bahá'í Faith do not merely concern the equalization of the means of livelihood. Notwithstanding the emphasis they place on the alleviation of poverty, the Bahá'í writings are replete with teachings that highlight key themes in economic growth, such as order, efficiency, human capital, productivity, and sustainability. They stress that not only must extreme poverty and wealth be eradicated, but the society and the individual, rich and poor, must also be able to progress economically. As will be discussed in the section "A Normative Framework," through a combination of individual and institutional rights and responsibilities, some Bahá'í principles offer a path towards abolishing the extremes of wealth and poverty and achieving comfort and wellbeing for everyone, while others advance a vision for the orderly organization of the economy with degrees and ranks—not equality—to facilitate economic growth.

The following sections first offer a brief survey of key themes and principles found in prevalent theories of justice and welfare, and then conceptualize standards and virtues that underlie the Bahá'í approach to economic prosperity. To do the latter, it is necessary to construct a framework for thinking about underlying virtues. These can be thought of as the constitutional principles, emanating from the reality of the human soul, that any specific economic law, regulation, or practice must

conform with. They are the conceptual abstractions that describe, always apply to, and guide, every economic activity, irrespective of its type, sector, and location, the specific context and circumstances, or the economic actors involved. It is also useful to provide another framework for organizing norms: secondary, context-dependent, action-guiding principles that prescribe and act as standards of economic behavior, and that may apply individually or together to an economic activity, depending on the type, sector, location, context, circumstances, and the economic protagonists involved. The first group of principles forms the conceptual framework; the second group constitutes the normative framework. Each norm in the latter can be traced back to one or more underlying virtues in the former. Similarly, depending on the circumstances, each underlying virtue can give rise to one or more norms, including norms that appear to directly oppose each other. For example, as will be illustrated, the rights-based virtue that underlies justice, termed “render each his due,” may necessitate equality in one scenario, but inequality in another.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

WELFARE

To appreciate the significance of the conceptual framework of principles governing the Bahá’í model of economic prosperity, it is helpful to first briefly review mainstream economic

understandings of human welfare. Hausman et al. differentiate between substantive and formal theories of welfare. Substantive theories of welfare state *what* things are intrinsically good for people; formal theories of welfare specify *how* we can identify the things that are intrinsically good for people, but they do not state what those things are. Normative economists tend to focus on formal theories of welfare and leave the substantive question of what things are good for people up to people themselves. Mainstream economists, who are committed to utility theory in explaining human choices, consider preference satisfaction to be the fundamental measure of welfare. They postulate, as an axiomatic foundation of their theory, that individuals are exclusively self-interested agents who seek to maximize their utility and profit and whose preference is based on what is better for them. In standard economic models, then, welfare is the satisfaction of preferences. There are several problems with this concept of welfare, which pose a challenge to both formal and substantive theories of welfare. To name a few: people do care about more than their own welfare, defined as the satisfaction of preferences; they may prefer something that is bad for them because they do not always know what is beneficial or detrimental to them; people have different values as well as different beliefs about their values, and, insofar as people’s preferences emanate from their beliefs, their preferences can change or conflict with each other (Hausman et al. ch. 8).

John Rawls, who also considers welfare to be the satisfaction of rational preferences, suggests that because people are partly responsible for their own welfare, social policy should focus on that aspect of welfare for which society is responsible. He, therefore, espouses an index of primary social goods, like income, to measure welfare (*A Theory of Justice* ch. 2.15). Amartya Sen proposes a capabilities approach to welfare. He suggests that social policy should focus on people's capabilities—abilities like literacy—rather than on what they make of their capabilities, which is determined by individual choice, or on resources, such as Rawls's primary social goods (ch. 3). In what can be seen as a substantive theory of welfare, Martha Nussbaum proposes a specific list of central human functional capabilities, such as life, bodily health and integrity, emotions, and play, which, she argues, have survived cross-cultural scrutiny and can, therefore, serve as the basis for welfare guarantees (78–80).

These views of welfare do not encompass the entirety of the Bahá'í vision of prosperity. Unlike most standard normative theories of welfare, the Bahá'í approach to economic prosperity addresses both substantive and formal questions of welfare. It prescribes, as will be demonstrated in the following sections, how things that are intrinsically good for people should be identified; it also provides a list of what should constitute welfare.

The substantive elements of welfare that are found in the Bahá'í teachings,

unlike those in the above-mentioned theories, do not emanate from the people's beliefs and preferences, but from God's all-encompassing knowledge of His creatures, of the purpose of their existence, and, therefore, of what is intrinsically good for them (INBA 71:59; Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers* 151, 182, 195–196; the Báb, *Selections* 201). The Bahá'í writings expand the definition of welfare to include not only wealth, but also access to knowledge, education, art, industry, training, power, and commerce ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret* 29; *Some Answered Questions* no. 78). Consequently, the enforceable obligations that arise from the right of every individual to welfare—that serve as the moral basis of constitutional guarantees—likewise include access to knowledge, education, art, industry, training, power, and commerce. It is in this light that the Bahá'í writings advocate the obligatory education of all children and mandate the community to provide the means for the education of a child if the parents are unable to do so ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* no. 227). This helps break the cycle of poverty as receiving education and skills increases one's opportunities and chances of getting out of the poverty trap.

JUSTICE

In order to conceptualize the Bahá'í approach to economic prosperity, it is now important, for several reasons, to briefly examine some conceptions of justice and its development in the Bahá'í writings. When poverty is allowed to reach

a condition of starvation, it is a clear sign that somewhere we can find injustice (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* no. 46). But when, in addition to sporadic and isolated cases of starvation, poverty causes misery, demoralization, and degradation among the masses, this is a clear indicator of a systemic injustice. In the distribution of economic output, justice is the guiding standard. Besides, formal conceptions of welfare are traditionally developed within theories of justice. In standard theories of welfare as a social policy, the first virtue of social institutions is justice (Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* 3). Classical theories maintain that justice is to “render each his due”—a definition found in the Institutes of Justinian, a codification of the Roman Law from the sixth century AD. Libertarians view justice as respecting one’s rights. Utilitarians espouse utility-maximizing principles that facilitate cooperation and resolve conflicts. Contractualists define what is due to each person through principles such as mutual advantage, impartiality, and reciprocity, to include equal liberty and equal opportunity (Hausman et al. ch. 12). Nevertheless, all these conventional theories of justice offer a rights-based definition of justice, in that they limit the scope of justice to the protection and satisfaction of rights that derive from human nature and that are owed equally to everyone, regardless of their merits. It will be shown that in the Bahá’í writings, justice is developed within a framework of standards that go beyond the protection of equal rights, to include non-rights-based

considerations for one’s merits or measures set by God—capacity, wisdom, intelligence, knowledge, talents, abilities, and skills—as well as generosity and sacrifice.

In the Bahá’í view, the essence and the source of justice are embodied in the ordinances prescribed by the Manifestations of God (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* no. 88). To observe justice, therefore, is to carry out the laws of God and, as will be explored further, the fear of God³ invokes the moral obligation to guarantee the unconditional authority of justice (*Gleanings* no. 88; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Secret* 45). This imperative stems from the Bahá’í belief that regards humanity “as a single individual, and one’s own self as a member of that corporeal form,” and that considers the suffering of one as the suffering of all (*Secret* 46). The proper functioning of the body politic, then, depends on justice (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 77). This primacy of justice has two

3 In the Bahá’í teachings, fear of God refers to the fear that by not living according to God’s will, one deprives oneself of His love. This “dread of Divine displeasure” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* no. 44) does not emanate from His cruelty, but from His justice (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in “Bahá’í Education” no. 143), as failure to fulfil one’s obligations may be met with God’s justice. The fear of God that motivates one to act in accordance with His will is likened to a child’s fear of “the righteous anger and chastisement of a parent” (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in “Bahá’í Education” no. 133). For more information, see Taherzadeh 94–96.

significant implications for its intrinsic link with welfare: Firstly, in the Bahá'í view, justice means “to have no regard for one’s own personal benefits and selfish advantages” and, therefore, to “consider the welfare of the community as one’s own” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Secret* 45–46). This represents a clear departure from the standard concept of welfare as satisfaction of preferences. Secondly, justice applies unconditionally and universally in all social and economic relationships. David Hume argues that in true welfare, there is no reason to appeal to justice because resources are so abundant that partition of goods serves no purpose (16). That is to say, the requirements of justice apply only when distributing insufficient resources. In the Bahá'í view of economy, however, justice is a prerequisite for welfare. No social relation or economic activity could be perceived in which justice need not be a governing principle. While the applicability of justice is independent of the context, its mode of application may vary in different scenarios. It is in the application of this immutable belief to the question of economic disparity that the Bahá'í writings assert that the appropriation of excessive wealth by a few individuals is in itself unfair and unjust, regardless of the needs of the masses (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 78). Abolishing extreme wealth is, therefore, as important as, but not dependent upon, the distribution of resources or the state of the economy.

In order to show that the Bahá'í approach to economic progress and

disparity expands the scope for the application of economic justice, it is useful to explore three standards that underlie the consideration of economic justice in the Bahá'í writings and delineate the scope of its application and implications. Together, these three standards constitute the conceptual framework that can generate normative prescriptions for economic rights and responsibilities.

RENDER EACH HIS DUE

In numerous instances, but only as a starting point, both Bahá'u'lláh (INBA 47:42; *Tablets* 167) and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (*Selections* no. 153; INBA 88:121) maintain that justice is to render each his due. Although They adopt this classical definition of justice as a vehicle for the delivery of Their teachings, it is important to note that They invest it with a new meaning. According to this definition, justice has to do with how individual people are treated and just treatment is something due to each person, which suggests that justice is a matter of claims that can be rightfully made—that justice can be demanded. At a rudimentary level, it is in light of this rights-based approach that the Bahá'í teachings stipulate that “every human being has the right to live; they have a right to rest, and to a certain amount of well-being” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 40:19). This standard guarantees access to basic necessities of life for all individuals. As a corollary to this definition of justice, the right of each individual to a certain amount of

well-being becomes an obligation that should be enforceable.

SET MEASURES

The Bahá'í writings, however, uniquely complement this rights-based perspective with, and make it subject to, a second standard of justice: “set measures” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 167). What is due to each person is not always one's right, as previously qualified; it is also what one *deserves*. Therefore, the allocation of resources, benefits, or outputs is adjusted commensurate with one's capacity, intelligence, wisdom, knowledge, talents, abilities, and skills, and to reflect the realities of time and place, in order to preserve the natural order and balance in society and acknowledge the natural distinctions and ranks among the people. As mentioned previously, far from perpetuating a stagnant system of hierarchy, distinction based on merit requires the existence of degrees and ranks in society but does not permanently tie individuals to their ranks; rather, it allows for mobility and individual progress. Shoghi Effendi stresses that “social inequality is the inevitable outcome of the natural inequality of men” and that “human beings are different in ability and should, therefore, be different in their social and economic standing” (qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 1865). Consequently, while access to basic necessities of life is each individual's right, greater measures are set for some who, owing to their circumstances, capacities, resources, and contributions, deserve a

greater share of the output. This standard of justice guarantees economic progress and an orderly organization of the economy. An implication of this measures-based or merits-based standard is that what is due to each individual could become an enforceable obligation and serve as a moral basis of constitutional guarantees (Nussbaum 74).

In the Bahá'í approach to economic prosperity, the scope for justice, as an underlying virtue, is expanded to not only incorporate the standard rights-based notion of justice, but also include a measures-based concept of justice. Beyond this, the Bahá'í approach to prosperity integrates within its conceptual framework yet another important underlying virtue that serves to readjust the relationships that constitute economic activity: generosity.

GENEROSITY

Time and again a rights-based definition of justice in the Bahá'í teachings is immediately followed—and offset—by a statement urging everyone to desire for others only that which one desires for oneself (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* no. 49) and to “strive to provide for the comfort of all” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* no. 102). The Bahá'í approach to addressing economic progress and disparity goes beyond a traditional theory of justice to include generosity and sacrifice. According to this standard, generous treatment is something due to each person and expected of each person. This signifies that no claim

needs to be made for what is due to oneself—that what is due need not be demanded⁴—and that one may be given a share of the output not according to one's desert—that one may receive undeservingly. Introducing generosity as a purpose of economic activity, 'Abdu'l-Bahá instructs every person to “have an occupation, a trade or a craft, so that he may carry other people's burdens, and not himself be a burden to others” (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, 1 Mar. 2017). This standard, therefore, facilitates the flow of wealth and contributes to economic prosperity. As will be explored further, a corollary to this standard is that as a moral basis of religious law it may justify special obligations of humanity in response to which people could be expected to do more than justice requires them to.

A superimposition of these three standards into one conceptual framework, as a layered spectrum that represents and emanates from the collective manifestation of the nobility and dignity of humankind, expands the conception of economic justice and, consequently, the scope for its application and implications, within which the theories of welfare are traditionally developed. The interplay between these three standards effloresces into a system of dynamic structure and methodical fluidity that is characterized by a certain unity in diversity. This

4 The interaction between generosity and the concept of enforceable obligations, mentioned under “Render each his due” and “Set measures,” will be discussed later.

conceptual framework for addressing economic progress and disparity gives rise to a normative framework that would prescribe a Bahá'í model of economic rights and responsibilities. If the individual and institutional rights and responsibilities that the Bahá'í framework for economic prosperity prescribes embody these underlying virtues and satisfy the expanded scope for economic justice, they deliver outcomes that go beyond the imperatives of the conventional models of welfare.

A NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

FROM REVOLUTION TO ORGANIC EVOLUTION

Whether as individuals or communities, Bahá'ís throughout the world are putting into practice the elements of Bahá'u'lláh's vision for the spiritual and material prosperity of humankind. In particular, they bring the Bahá'í laws, principles, and teachings on economic life to bear on the condition of society. They believe that it is through the gradual transformation of individuals and communities, not merely the formulation of workable theories, that the world can tackle the issues of economic progress and disparity.

It is useful to describe the Bahá'í approach to social change by exploring Danesh and Musta's discussion of social forms, social norms, and social meanings. Social forms are institutions and organizations that structure and order the life of society, as well as the tools they use for the exercise of their

functions, such as laws and policies. Social forms, therefore, are the most directly observable influencers of social action through which public power is organized and exercised. Social norms, conversely, are behavioral expectations that prescribe the established and accepted behavior. Bahá'ís do not pursue social change in wider society through revolution, which seeks to change social forms. While they may contribute to the discourse and action regarding the progress of social forms and the advancement of social norms, this tends not to be their primary focus. Changing social forms requires the exercise of social power and often causes social conflict; changing social norms usually places the focus on those who do not comply with the new norms and can thus be divisive. Bahá'ís, rather, see their contribution to social change as a process of organic evolution: With a focus on change at the level of social meanings—shared mental associations constructed to reinforce sets of behaviors, understandings, or outcomes—representing an epistemic vision of social change, they seek to increase awareness, understanding, and consciousness that reinforce the realities of unity, justice, and generosity. New social meanings, in turn, encourage behaviors that reflect these realities. This acts as a social force that shapes social norms and facilitates the evolution of new social forms. With the long-term commitment to constructing new social meanings, new patterns that reflect the underlying virtues of the Bahá'í economics emerge and a context is created

in which the movement of economic actors toward evolving social norms and social forms takes place in a more organic manner (11–16).

Another significant distinction between the Bahá'í framework for addressing economic justice and most prevalent theories, like that of John Rawls, thus emerges: The solutions offered in standard theories of economic justice rely heavily on social policy and distributive systems, but do not expect the individual participants in the economy to do much, particularly in their moral and spiritual life. On the contrary, in order to realize its ideals and economic teachings, the Bahá'í approach relies concomitantly on laws, social structures, and institutional distributive systems, as well as on individuals, who are expected not only to embody the high ideals enshrined in the Bahá'í teachings, but also to bring them to bear on the condition of life in society.

At the current stage in the process of translating the Bahá'í laws, principles, and teachings into a future Bahá'í economic system, universal elements of a normative framework are becoming distinguishable—concepts of practical import, oriented to effecting an action; action-guiding concepts that prescribe, rather than conceptual abstractions that describe. Milestones of a possible roadmap, ambitious yet within reach, could be anticipated: A popular endorsement of these norms would enable the emergence of shared ethics—those aspirational values and behaviors that allow a population to define the outcomes of its economy. In order to achieve these

outcomes, economic policies could then be pursued. These policies would, in turn, prescribe behavior and inform the application of such laws, principles, and teachings that form the basis of the Bahá'í approach to addressing economic progress and disparity. A wide application could give rise to the advent of an economic order, a reorganization of affairs, encompassing institutions, structures, relationships, and practices that would, in turn, define social indicators, as well as inequality and poverty measurements, such as metrics for a just income distribution. To this end, it is hoped that a formulation of normative objectives would ultimately inform the utilization of practical tools.

DISCOURSE

Positive economics engages empirical and theoretical discourse and questions of facts, whereas normative economics engages ethical and political discourse and questions of fairness. The discourse on economic progress and disparity is dominated by reference to analysis and empirical evidence. On the other hand, authoritative voices that elevate ideological assumptions—that economic growth leads to poverty alleviation, for instance—to the rank of common sense command the economic discourse and evade the consequences of unsubstantiated assertions. Here it is hoped that a formulation of norms that apply to different settings and realities would engage thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and actions that constitute much of the ethical and political discourse

and contribute to better organization and planning, evaluation of outcomes and courses of action, prioritization of goals, and application of solutions to actual prevailing conditions.

The Bahá'í teachings on economic activity do not cover the whole field of theoretical and applied economics (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 1862); neither do they contain any technical teachings on specific questions of economics, such as monetary measures, income distribution, relationship between labor and capital, ownership, control and distribution of capital, means of production, trusts and monopolies, banking, and price system (nos. 1862, 1867, 1868). They mainly concern the spirit that has to permeate economic relations (no. 1864). They make economic value judgements and provide guiding principles for effecting necessary readjustments in the economy. The Bahá'í approach to the question of economic progress and disparity specifies a two-fold outcome: safeguarding basic necessities of life and a certain amount of well-being for all individuals on the one hand and an orderly organization of the economy with degrees and ranks, not equality, in the distribution of wealth on the other. Insofar as economic conditions are driven by different ideologies, models, and sectors, different technical solutions apply when tackling economic progress and disparity in each case. The Bahá'í approach, however, addresses principles, as will follow, that apply to all economic systems one way or another.

EQUALITY

It is only from the perspective of procedural justice that the Bahá'í writings stress equality: "equal opportunity of the means of existence" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 40:19), "equal standard of human rights" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* no. 63), and equality before the law—that "the law must reign, and not the individual" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 40:21). They assert that "all men are equal before God" (*Paris Talks* 40:10) and that "all men must be treated equally" because "this is inherent in the very nature of humanity" (*Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 29).

As a distributive norm, however, equality requires that costs and rewards be shared equally regardless of input. The Bahá'í writings reject this principle, suggesting that equality in distribution is untenable as it "would result in chaos and disorder, disrupt livelihoods, provoke universal discontent, and undermine the orderly conduct of the affairs of the community" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 78:5).

NEED

The need principle suggests that regardless of input, economic output must be first allocated to those in greatest need. According to the Bahá'í teachings, the output of economic activity must be distributed first to those whose income cannot meet their expenses, as well as to the invalid, the orphan, and the

poor ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* no. 102). For this purpose, the amount of one's need is defined as the difference between one's actual income and expenses, adjusted to provide, in advance, for a loss of income due to unemployment or incapacity (*Promulgation* no. 102; *Some Answered Questions* no. 78). 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that "the arrangements of the circumstances of the people must be such that poverty shall disappear" (*Paris Talks* no. 46) and that laws and regulations must be passed that guarantee the essential needs of the poor (*Some Answered Questions* no. 78). In this sense, the need norm can be considered a deontic norm in that it creates enforceable obligations. While according to the Bahá'í teachings this norm applies to all, regardless of their employment status, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, specifically concerning workers, that their remuneration must adequately meet their daily needs, but also include additional wages or a share in the revenues of their place of work to ensure their comfort and wellbeing in times of unemployment or incapacity (*Some Answered Questions* no. 78). Just as the rich enjoy the ease and luxuries of life, the poor must also have a comfortable life, with the basic amount of comfort determined by one's needs. In other words, all the expenses of those who may not be able to generate income, such as the orphan or the invalid, and the necessary expenses of the poor, whose means do not meet their ends, must be defrayed ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* no. 102). The poor must have a pleasant home

and be provided with sustenance and comforts commensurate with their needs (*Promulgation* nos. 42, 63). This principle should guide the efforts to safeguard basic necessities of life for all and to abolish extremes of poverty.

SUFFICIENCY

The sufficiency norm stipulates that regardless of input, each person should have enough. What constitutes sufficiency and how much is “enough” may vary in different scenarios. For example, while on one dimension merely fulfilling all of one’s needs could be deemed enough, on another scale gaining certain capabilities or utilizing certain skills may be considered enough. When available resources are too few to bring everyone up to the sufficiency threshold, one may propose maximizing the number of people who achieve sufficiency, whereas another may advocate a thin spread of resources to minimize the total shortfall suffered by all (Miller). In the Bahá’í approach to eradicating economic disparity, the sufficiency norm safeguards a wellbeing floor—access to the basic necessities of life (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* nos. 40, 46). As noted in the previous section, the Bahá’í teachings assert that every human being should be able to live and rest, and must be provided enough food, clothing, and other sufficient means of existence (*Paris Talks* nos. 40, 46). They, however, introduce other provisions, such as education (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ¶ 48) and training (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Secret* 29;

Some Answered Questions no. 78), as necessary for economic progress. Sufficiency, therefore, is the action-guiding principle that would prescribe requirements of welfare in order to lift the poor out of poverty (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* no. 42) and set them up for progress in a society, commensurate with its socio-economic realities and necessities.

EQUITY

The equity principle requires that the input shall determine the outcome. In other words, this principle prescribes that whoever contributes more should get an ampler share of the reward. The Bahá’í writings do not introduce this norm to abolish the extremes of wealth and poverty and to safeguard basic necessities of life for all individuals. They, rather, highlight the equity principle to address economic progress—that equity should guide an orderly organization of the economy such that degrees and ranks remain and wealth is distributed commensurate with each individual’s contribution. They clarify that contribution to the economy is not purely monetary and includes management, toil, and labor, among others. The equity principle is specifically endorsed for labor relations and employee remuneration. This indicates, for example, that between two workers who are employed to do the same job, all other things being equal, the one who works harder must be remunerated more. The Bahá’í writings also argue that since the business owner provides the capital

and management and the workers provide toil and labor, the workers must be given an equitable share in the profits of the business in addition to their daily wage ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 78).

DESERT

The desert norm entails a distribution of costs and rewards based on what one deserves. According to the Bahá'í writings, the appropriate quantity of means that is due to each individual may go beyond one's rights, or even one's contribution, to reflect a standard of "set measures" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 167; Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 1865). In other words, one's share of wealth must be adjusted to correspond with what one deserves—that is, commensurate with one's capacity, knowledge, talents, abilities, and skills, in order to preserve the natural order, balance, and ranks. This may suggest, for instance, that between two workers who are employed to do the same job, other things equal, the one with more knowledge in that field deserves to be remunerated more. As discussed previously, in classes of people with various degrees of intelligence, capacity, and resources there is order but no equality: "Social inequality is the inevitable outcome of the natural inequality of men. Human beings are different in ability and should, therefore, be different in their social and economic standing" (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 1865). Therefore, "wages should be unequal, simply because

men are unequal in their ability, and hence should receive wages that would correspond to their varying capacities and resources" (no. 1867). Like equity, the desert principle mainly functions as a guide to maintaining an orderly organization and stimulating economic progress, rather than directly tackling the extremes of wealth and poverty.

RESPONSIBILITY

The responsibility norm requires those who have more to share their wealth with those who have less. The Bahá'í writings instruct the rich to protect the poor as the trust of God (Bahá'u'lláh, *Persian Hidden Words* no. 54). This trusteeship constitutes the moral foundation of the economic responsibility of the rich towards the poor. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that "the wealthy should offer up each year a portion of their wealth for the sustenance of the poor and the assistance of the needy" (*Some Answered Questions* 78:12). This requirement is prescribed as a religious injunction that is binding upon all. The responsibility norm can also be considered a deontic norm insofar as it creates special obligations.

It should be noted that, in many cases, more than one norm would apply when addressing economic progress or disparity even in specific locations and settings or in situations that concern individuals. A norm that can most suitably guide a specific question of economic activity will often need to be supplemented by other principles to prescribe the distribution of resources,

primarily in situations in which resources are insufficient to fulfil everyone's needs, lift everyone out of poverty, or bring everyone up to a sufficiency threshold.

Justice takes a comparative form when the rights of others also need to be considered in order to determine what is due to each individual. It takes a non-comparative form when the consideration of one's circumstances is sufficient to determine what is due to that person. While the Bahá'í teachings stress that "the arrangements of the circumstances of the people must be such that poverty shall disappear" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 46:2), they also emphasize that everyone should share in comfort and well-being, as far as possible, according to one's rank and position (*Paris Talks* no. 46). Rank and position are, by nature, relative factors in considering the distribution of costs and gains. One's rank and position, therefore, impact distributive outcomes only in interaction with the ranks and positions of other individuals. Unsurprisingly then the sufficiency norm may prescribe outcomes that would embody comparative justice, while the need, equity, and desert norms may guide actions that would characterize non-comparative justice.

NOVELTY OF THE BAHÁ'Í APPROACH TO ADDRESSING ECONOMIC PROGRESS AND DISPARITY

The Bahá'í approach to addressing economic progress and disparity exemplifies, reunites, and integrates within

its framework some of the wholesome and noble elements that can be found in recognized models of welfare and perspectives of justice and normative ethics.

CONSERVATISM

The elements of the Bahá'í approach are generally conservative, in a philosophical sense. The Bahá'í Faith stresses comfort and wellbeing for the individual and order and organization for society through preservation of social order, government intervention, and taxation.⁵ For instance, concerning the imperative for the orderly organization of the economy, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "the law of order must always obtain in the world of humanity" and that "degrees are absolutely necessary to ensure an orderly organization" (*Paris Talks* 46:5,6). Similarly, challenging the extremes of liberty and autonomy, He asserts that were people to be left to their own devices, they would become like a horde of brutes and beasts of the field, that they would become ferocious, wild, and bloodthirsty, and be consumed in the fire of rebellion ("Risáliy-i-Síyásíyyih" 3).

CLASSICAL LIBERALISM

Nevertheless, the Bahá'í approach also integrates classical liberal principles of utilitarianism, as a normative

5 In *Risáliy-i-Síyásíyyih*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stresses that people must pay their taxes in a spirit of gratitude and contentment.

theory, by emphasizing the greatest happiness principle as an intuitive, action-guiding criterion. In a formulation of the overarching goal of economic readjustment, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stipulates that “the readjustment of the economic laws for the livelihood of man must be effected in order that all humanity may live in the greatest happiness according to their respective degrees” (*Promulgation* no. 60). In another utilitarian critique of economic relations and intuitive application of justice, He asserts that “the factory owners reap a fortune every day, but the wage the poor workers are paid cannot even meet their daily needs: This is most unfair, and assuredly no just man can accept it” (*Some Answered Questions* 78:5). He further questions “How can one see one’s fellow men hungry, destitute, and deprived, and yet live in peace and comfort in one’s splendid mansion? How can one see others in the greatest need and yet take delight in one’s fortune?” (78:12).

CONSEQUENTIALISM

Similar to the above descriptions that emphasize morality of the outcome of economic activity, other Bahá’í teachings can also be said to highlight the consequentialist perspective of normative ethics. They censure dishonesty, corruption, and commoditizing truth in generating wealth (Universal House of Justice, 28 Dec. 2010). They denounce egoism and self-interest, underline altruism, and describe a purpose of economic activity as selflessly

delivering the masses out of poverty (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Secret* 120; Universal House of Justice, 1 Mar. 2017). Highlighting altruism, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “souls who are detached from all save God, for the love of His Beauty have mercy on the poor and expend their substance on the destitute—nay more, with the utmost joy and pleasure bestow their whole wealth, or a part thereof, upon the poor. In other words, in their love for their fellow men they are self-sacrificial, preferring the interests and comfort of the generality of the people to those of a particular group” (Nakhjavani 93). He, likewise, asserts that “man should voluntarily and of his own choice sacrifice his property and life for others, and spend willingly for the poor” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 227:19). Finally, statements by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that commend and praise wealth “if it is dedicated to the welfare of society” and “provided the entire population is wealthy” (*Secret* 29) paint a welfarist picture of the Bahá’í approach.

VIRTUE ETHICS AND DEONTOLOGY

Numerous passages in the Bahá’í writings stress the importance of one’s purity of intention while others emphasize one’s purity of action in economic activity. The former, focusing on the character of the individual, can be seen as highlighting virtue ethics while the latter, focusing on the status of the action and considering one’s rights and responsibilities, can be viewed as aligning with deontology. Corresponding to

the first perspective, Bahá'u'lláh urges His followers to strive that their “deeds may be cleansed from the dust of self and hypocrisy and find favor at the court of glory; for ere long the assayers of mankind shall, in the holy presence of the Adored One, accept naught but absolute virtue and deeds of stainless purity” (Persian Hidden Words no. 69). Featuring the second perspective, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

The highest righteousness of all is for blessed souls to take hold of the hands of the helpless and deliver them out of their ignorance and abasement and poverty, and with pure motives, and only for the sake of God, to arise and energetically devote themselves to the service of the masses, forgetting their own worldly advantage and working only to serve the general good. (*Secret* 120)

To further elaborate on this deontological basis of the Bahá'í approach to tackling the problem of economic progress and disparity, it can be argued that the Bahá'í belief that access to basic necessities of life is an absolute, natural right of the individual accords with Locke's Natural Rights Theory (¶¶ 27–39). Additionally, as we stated earlier, Bahá'í beliefs such as the inherent oneness of humankind, collaboration and mutual support, and equality in human rights, as well as sharing and sacrifice, underlie the aforementioned normative effects. A suggestion that these underlying beliefs can be popularly endorsed

and universally adopted, if people were unbiased, overlaps with a contractualist perspective of deontology.

PRAGMATIC ETHICS

A comparison of the Bahá'í approach with pragmatic ethics is also enlightening. Ethical pragmatists promote social reform and maintain that morality evolves socially over time (Dewey 324, ch. 7; Mill, *On Liberty* ch. 3). Bahá'u'lláh asserts that “all men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization” (*Gleanings* no. 109). Bahá'ís view economic progress, individual and collective maturity, generation, dissemination, and application of knowledge, and moral development as processes of organic evolution—not revolution and reform. Bahá'ís throughout the world, under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, follow a pattern of active inquiry—action, reflection, consultation, and study—to translate the Bahá'í teachings into reality and bring them to bear on the condition of life in urban neighborhoods as well as in rural settings. They learn about the principles of economic justice and advance these norms through action and reflection.

While the Bahá'í approach to addressing economic progress and disparity embodies numerous elements found in these established models of welfare and perspectives of justice and normative ethics, it cannot be said to have been modelled after any one of them. Instead, the Bahá'í approach reconciles conservative and liberal perspectives

on the economy. It emphasizes that maximizing the opportunity of the individual in order to realize his or her full potential and government protection of the vulnerable must be the objective of the economy—a view of the economy now shared by both conservatives and liberals as the line between the two camps is increasingly fading. It embodies and reconciles elements of individual and utilitarian justice in that it is concerned with how each person is treated, yet it looks to the overall consequences aggregated across people to guide policies and judge actions. It neither adopts the Capitalist theories nor does it agree with the Marxists and Communists in relation to individual ownership (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 1862). It sanctions private ownership, but calls for a complete re-examination of its application. It enshrines equality to deliver justice in procedure but inequality to safeguard justice in distribution. It assimilates comparative and non-comparative perspectives of justice in that, depending on the setting, it considers the individual's own circumstances and the rights of others to both meet the basic necessities of the poor and facilitate the overall economic progress of society. It cannot readily be classified, however, either as comparative or non-comparative. It calls for social and economic inequalities to be arranged to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged (Rawls, *Political Liberalism* 283) when it stresses that “the arrangements of the circumstances of the people must be such that poverty shall disappear”

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* no. 46). It can be considered a systemic approach in that it aims to provide outcomes that raise the worst off person to the highest possible level while delivering neither a fixed amount of the basic necessities of life nor one that hinges on what is distributed to others.

In the scope of distributive justice, various theories place the responsibility for the distribution of wealth on the institutions of society. While recognizing this, inasmuch as the Bahá’í teachings regard humankind as one indivisible whole, they also hold humankind responsible as a collective agent for the distributive outcomes it allows to occur. From an international distributive justice perspective within the Bahá’í approach to economic prosperity, therefore, collective identity necessitates individual responsibility.

CONCLUSION

A SHARED ETHIC

Addressing the economic maladies of our time, the Universal House of Justice states that “the world is in desperate need of a shared ethic, a sure framework for addressing the crises” (1 Mar. 2017). One of the root causes of the problem of economic progress and disparity is the subjective morality of the rich and the poor, of different ideologies, models, and sectors. Each group holds a different opinion as to whether a solution to our economic ills is appropriate, right, ethical, moral, and therefore desirable. The world needs

to attain a greater degree of objectivity. Poverty is a global problem and it requires a global solution. A global approach from subjective morality towards objective fairness, therefore, could begin with an agreement on normative standards.

The Bahá'í Faith can offer unique insights into the solution to the global problem of economic progress and disparity. Bahá'ís throughout the world are engaging their peers in conversations about, and learning to act in accordance with, such spiritual verities as the spiritual reality of humankind and its inherent oneness, collective trusteeship, the inherent nobility of every human being, and the capacity of the soul to manifest all the names and attributes of God. In parallel, within a broader framework for contributing to the progress and transformation of society, Bahá'ís are embarking on projects and activities for social action and engaging in genuine conversations in which they offer insights from the Bahá'í writings and their experience in applying them, in order to contribute to the evolution of thought and the betterment of society (Universal House of Justice, 4 Jan. 2009; 22 Feb. 2011; 20 Oct. 2014; 27 Apr. 2017).

These initiatives are gradually improving the condition of life in society and producing a new universal attitude and a new set of values in individuals. Values are people's abstract concepts of what is important to them. Norms are action-guiding standards and expectations that enforce values. If values can be thought of as ends, norms

are means of achieving these ends. The Bahá'í writings are a source of normative value which is independent of the subjective morality of various economic actors. The world needs to seriously consider whether it can popularly endorse these underlying principles and ethical precepts, or the normative effects they create. Doing so will unite us to collectively aspire for mutual values and behaviors and allow public policies to align with these values. If popularly endorsed, these norms would strengthen economic order and cohesion and promote economic activity that is socially and globally valued. As we strive to build our economies and alleviate poverty, as we examine solutions to better address our economic ills, searching consultation—not only among leaders, but also with those whom they represent, serve, and lead—becomes of paramount importance.

BEYOND WELFARE

'Abdu'l-Bahá states that Bahá'u'lláh has revealed principles and regulations that ensure the welfare of the world (*Promulgation* no. 63). The elements of the Bahá'í approach to addressing economic progress and disparity discussed thus far—namely equal opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth, public responsibility towards those who are unable to meet the basic necessities of life, people's right to what they have not worked to earn for themselves, and the imperative to protect the interest of those who are unable to

protect themselves—clearly provide a blueprint for welfare governance.

Bahá'u'lláh ordains that those who are possessed of riches “must have the utmost regard for the poor” (*Gleanings* 100:3). Nevertheless, He also urges the poor to “exert themselves and strive to earn the means of livelihood” (100:4). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá even goes further to assert: “Every person must have an occupation, a trade or a craft, so that he may carry other people’s burdens, and not himself be a burden to others” (qtd. in *Compilation* 3).

Acknowledging that legal obligation is an effective instrument for the security and protection of man and that moral obligation deters him from and guards him against unworthy and unseemly conduct, the Bahá’í writings introduce the fear of God as the true source of moral obligation (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 63, 93; *Epistle* 26, 74, 135; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *A Traveller’s Narrative* 72). In this sense, morality can have a special binding force on behavior, in that moral action is motivated by moral obligation and that without other obligations at play, moral obligation alone impels us towards good and deters us from evil (Foot; Korsgaard). Without the fear of God, legal obligation prevents people only outwardly from unseemly conduct, while moral obligation—or conscience (Mill, *Utilitarianism* ch. 3)—cannot alone motivate moral behavior as not everyone possesses it (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 63). Against this background, the Bahá’í teachings cultivate the righteousness that the fear of God inspires in individuals and establish institutions

that embody a combination of legal and moral obligations in society in tackling the problems of economic progress and disparity.

Therefore, in an even clearer departure from the established models of welfare, the Bahá’í writings institute a two-tiered approach to facilitating the distribution of wealth by introducing strong obligations and special obligations.

Strong obligations are duties prescribed by and enforceable under a law. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stresses that such special laws and regulations must be enacted that “will moderate the excessive fortunes of the few and meet the basic needs of the myriad millions of the poor” (*Some Answered Questions* 78:4). This provision would create a non-voluntary duty, legislatively mandatory for all, to be executed by the government, through “readjustment of the economic laws” (*Promulgation* no. 60), based on the need, sufficiency, and responsibility norms. It would seek to abolish the extremes of wealth and poverty (*Paris Talks* no. 46), achieve “a degree of moderation” (*Some Answered Questions* 78:4), and secure the comforts and privileges of life for everyone (*Promulgation* no. 44) according to their respective degrees and ranks (no. 60). For example, a distribution of economic output based on the natural differences in ranks, positions, or degrees could be readjusted through a taxation proportionate to capacity and production: If one’s need is equal to one’s producing capacity, one shall be exempt from taxes. If one’s income

is greater than one's needs, one must pay taxes commensurate with the surplus. And if one's income falls short of one's necessities, one shall receive an amount that is sufficient to cover the shortfall (*Promulgation* no. 77).

Special obligations are typically obligations owed to those with whom one has a special relationship, such as family members. Likening members of the human race to parts of a human body politic, as well as to branches, leaves, blossoms and fruits of a tree, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the entire human race is one "human family" (*Promulgation* no. 6). By normalizing the oneness of humankind and, therefore, universalizing special obligations, the Bahá'í teachings emphasize that each individual owes special obligations to other members of the human race. It is against this backdrop that the Bahá'í writings emphasize "voluntary sharing of one's property with others" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 227:19). They require the wealthy to "offer up each year a portion of their wealth for the sustenance of the poor and the assistance of the needy" (*Some Answered Questions* 78:12). This provision goes beyond the extrinsic imperative for abolishing the extremes of wealth and poverty to deliver an intrinsic voluntary responsibility, to be observed as a matter of free choice, guided by the need and responsibility norms (*Selections* no. 79). While religiously binding upon all, this obligation is not legislatively compulsory and will not be enforced (*Some Answered Questions* no. 78; *Selections* nos. 79, 227; Nakhjavani 93). For over

a century, Bahá'ís have been accruing knowledge and experience in practicing this provision (*Selections* no. 227).

The Bahá'í approach to addressing our economic maladies, therefore, raises the standard of justice, but exceeds it to include generosity and sacrifice. It is sometimes justifiable to require people to do more than justice demands them to do. There may exist enforceable obligations of humanity. The imperative for collective trusteeship renders the duties of humanity a natural responsibility of every individual. The Bahá'í writings transform the hearts and minds to act righteously in economic activities and declare the active participation of individuals indispensable to addressing economic growth and disparity. They reconceptualize wealth, prosperity, and economic activity in a manner that is not only delineated by the requirements of justice but also supported by concepts, principles, obligations, values, norms, practices, and individual imperatives that go beyond justice.

The prevalent models of welfare are developed within the traditional theories of justice. The underlying principles of the Bahá'í approach to economic progress and disparity expand the scope for the application and implications of economic justice. If they embody these principles and satisfy the expanded consideration for economic justice, the individual and institutional rights and responsibilities that the Bahá'í framework for economic prosperity prescribes go beyond the imperatives of the conventional models of welfare.

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