

A Reading of Sona Farid-Arbab's *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*

GERALD FILSON

INTRODUCTION

In setting out to determine the nature and scope of education, questions immediately arise when considering what makes education effective. Among those questions are the following: What should be the goal of education? How can we fit everything into a curriculum at a time when knowledge and information are accumulating at an unbelievable rate? And how can education address our need to learn about both the physical and the social world, different as they are? Farid-Arbab's book, *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*, is an admirable effort to provide answers to such questions by starting with two even more fundamental questions: What is the nature of the human being, or learner? And what is the nature of understanding?

Part 1 of this review of *Moral Empowerment* provides some comments about the background that led to the research and the ideas presented in the book. I then summarize the book

in part 2, paying attention to how the book develops a set of ideas about the subject (or learner), understanding (or the process of learning), and the objects of learning (the curriculum). Moral empowerment, covered in part 3, is the concept around which Farid-Arbab's conceptual framework is developed. In part 4, we look at the relationship between science and religion in order to gain a view of the range of appropriate objects of learning and the challenge of how to integrate a broad range of objects of learning into the curriculum. Finally, in part 5, we take up the central concept of capability as it serves to conceptualize an educational program. I then offer some concluding considerations on the continuity of thought, language, and action, as well as the collective and individual dimensions of education, along with a final note on the merits of the book.

PART ONE:

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The conceptual framework that Farid-Arbab presents in this book is familiar to many members of the Bahá'í community and their friends because it informs the community's current educational efforts around the world. With moral empowerment as the principal aim of education, the book describes an array of ideas that support that aim, looking at the assumptions of the framework and their implications for pedagogy and curriculum decisions.

By “conceptual framework” we understand Farid-Arbab to mean a set of concepts that are interrelated. A conceptual framework is less rigid and formal than a theory but more explicit than a paradigm. It can govern research and action in a particular area when various theories are used as sources of insight without total commitment to any of them. A conceptual framework generates a working vocabulary that facilitates collective discussion, exchange, and exploration and invites study, action, and reflection. It is not static, and it evolves as its various elements are better understood and elaborated in practice.

The framework of concepts developed by Farid-Arbab draws on principles and concepts from the Bahá'í Faith, supplemented and reinforced with insights from contemporary philosophy and psychology—specifically, the foundations of psychology rather than the psychology of learning. This makes sense because the foundational issues connected with a view of human nature and human capabilities require the kind of reflection that is more at home in philosophy before a deliberate effort is made to take account of educational psychology.

While Farid-Arbab refers to philosophers for whom education has been a central concern—including Richard Peters, Graham Haydon, and John Dewey—she draws more on the work of British epistemologist Paul H. Hirst with respect, especially, to the objects of learning. She also assesses the nature of the learner and the process

of understanding, bringing into the discussion insights from a number of philosophers not usually associated with education: John McDowell, Crispin Wright, Bernard Williams, Martha Nussbaum, Hubert Dreyfus, along with references to Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Heidegger, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and David Hume, as well as Alasdair MacIntyre, Immanuel Kant, and Søren Kierkegaard, among others. Their ideas, examined in the context of education, are a welcome feature of the book as contemporary philosophy has generated a rich set of insights about language, modernity, ethics, epistemology, and the nature of knowledge, as well as the nature of human practices and the differences between theoretical, or scientific, knowledge, and practical reason. Those insights are not canvassed nearly enough in educational theory. However, thinkers that are important in educational psychology are not overlooked, in particular Howard Gardner, Lev Vygotsky, and especially Jerome Bruner—three thinkers who give a wide overview of education in addition to their specific contributions to psychology and education.

In helping us understand and pursue better educational practice, the promise of this conceptual framework is already being tested in its successful application in educational initiatives of the Bahá'í community in diverse cultural and community settings around the world. More specifically, and with considerable rigor, the framework has proven its worth in more than forty

years of application and development in the work of the Fundación para la Aplicación Enseñanza de la Ciencias (FUNDAEC), a project in Colombia that gave birth to the ideas captured in this framework of concepts—one that has received praise and support from several foundations and research centers, including Canada's International Development Research Centre.

The Universal House of Justice has—over successive messages since the mid-1990s—described generally many of the concepts examined by Farid-Arbab, but with her book we now have a study of a number of those concepts at a greater level of detail and correlated with insights from philosophy. This should be of interest to Bahá'í adherents and their friends and partners in this promising worldwide educational enterprise. The publication will also be of interest to those who may not share the religious inspiration behind it.

Well suited to undertake this study, Farid-Arbab worked for ten years at the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre, the agency that supervises the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program that derives much of its approach from this conceptual framework. That program, among several other lines of action in the worldwide Bahá'í community, draws on concepts first pioneered by FUNDAEC. Farid-Arbab has been closely associated with FUNDAEC and so has benefited from familiarity with the thinking and developments that lie behind its success.

The kind of education Farid-Arbab has in mind is intended to meet the needs of a global community. It addresses issues that face those outside the richest 10 percent of the global population, while still important to those living in the wealthier pockets of the world. Farid-Arbab has in mind the current level of global inequity, as economic, cultural, and social agendas are determined by decisions made by small minorities in the richest nations of the world whose views shape the social and political dynamics that play out across the globe.

The effect that such inequity has had on education is a replication of patterns of formal education whose goals and organization are driven by models of what “modern development” should be at a time when conventional ideas of modern development are being questioned. The failure of education to respond adequately to world problems is linked partially to the structure of university and school educational models derived from an outworn idea of modernity, one ill-suited to emerging conditions in most countries of the world. In reaction, many responses have been driven by ideology more than by effective research, with outcomes scarcely better and often worse than failing traditional modes of education. Other well-meaning efforts—such as romantic and exaggerated notions of the traditional knowledge “of the people”—can overlook valuable scientific and technological knowledge essential to reaching at least modest levels of

prosperity. When those tensions are coupled with the understandable aspirations of families around the world to see their children gain the necessary formal accreditation to make their way in contemporary conditions, educational options too often reflect the contradictions of inequitable access to knowledge and efforts that remain too meagre to release the enormous potential of the world's young people. Even when enlightened reformers and philanthropists promote various schemes for development and education, often those who will benefit from them are treated as passive recipients instead of being empowered to make their own decisions and undertake their own course of action (Putnam 97). At the heart of this book is a vision of a new departure in how we think and practice education.

With moral empowerment as the goal of education, power to understand and take action is conceptualized, in Farid-Arbab's view, as shifted to those being educated; and morality and the responsibility to transform self and society are placed at the center of the educational enterprise. In taking such a view of education, she is wise enough to present her exploration of education by way of a framework of concepts, rather than in the form of a detailed theory, educational program, or set of pedagogical principles or procedures. Farid-Arbab writes, "[T]he aim [of the book] is to present a set of ideas that may assist those involved in Bahá'í-inspired endeavors to achieve greater coherence as they

strive to translate their ideals into effective educational programs. Emphasis is on the gradual development of a conceptual framework to which an increasing number of groups can contribute" (4). Such a framework must therefore be open to further development, as Farid-Arbab emphasizes. Her book, she states, might best be understood as a beginning exploration. By bringing into education a discussion of the spiritual nature of the subject and, less expected, the spiritual qualities that serve understanding itself, she gives the term "spiritual" a clarity and meaning that the term might not normally bring to mind.

Sometimes written in a condensed style, and not always easy to read, the framework is comprehensive enough to serve as a starting point, inviting and inspiring further practical experience, thinking, and research by setting out the beginnings of a vocabulary of concepts that will evolve, adjust, and develop more precision and depth over time. The value of Farid-Arbab's ideas is that they are robust enough to provide a vision and program of practice that is true to fundamental issues in education, yet described well enough to serve as the core of a research program that meets the criteria of a genuine—because systematic and collective—scientific approach to education.

PART TWO: A SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

As I have already mentioned and as the title clearly indicates, *Moral Empowerment* presents a framework of

ideas according to which the central goal of education is just that, moral empowerment. In developing those ideas, the author begins with an analysis of human nature and the range of human capacities that education should address. With this understanding of the learner, or “subject,” she examines the process of learning that has to do with “understanding” and the “fostering [of] spiritual qualities” as essential components in education. She then looks at “objects of learning,” or curriculum.

The first part of the book draws on the structure which that simple sentence describes about education at its most fundamental level: a subject understanding an object of learning. The chapter on moral empowerment is, therefore, followed by a chapter on the subject of understanding, then one on nurturing understanding, followed by three chapters on the objects of understanding.

It may be helpful to note Farid-Arbab’s vocabulary. She uses the term “subject” instead of “learner” and “understanding” as a more precise term than “learning,” linking understanding to spiritual qualities and other capabilities that work in an integrated manner with understanding. Unlike those who think of curriculum as a set of “subjects,” she uses the phrase “the object of understanding” as that which comprises the “content” or curricula of education. With this simple subject-verb-object sentence, “a subject understanding an object,” Farid-Arbab’s exploration points to

a relationship between the subjective and the objective, one of the principal themes of philosophy in the modern era.

The book presents an extensive list of capabilities of the subject, well beyond the merely cognitive and narrow list of capabilities that education typically addresses. In her view, understanding involves spiritual and moral qualities, attitudes, habits, and skills, as well as intellectual capacity and a motivation to act. The range of the objects of learning is also greater than that of a conventional curriculum would be. Thus, Farid-Arbab expands generously our appreciation of the three most important elements in the learning process: the subject of learning, understanding, and the objects of learning.

In the last half of the book, she turns to questions of pedagogy and curricula integration, engages in a deeper discussion of capabilities and agency of the learner, and closes with comments on the continuity of thought, language, and action and the need in modern life to avoid separating the qualities of the heart and the head and the individual and the collective.

For Farid-Arbab, the subject that understands is a human soul with faculties of perception, understanding, comprehension, imagination, and memory, as well as those faculties of the human soul such as love, justice, generosity, humility, awe, kindness, sacrifice, and affectivity. As extensive as this list of faculties is, Farid-Arbab argues that all need to be considered

in any adequate account of education. None of these features can be ignored if human nature in its reality is adequately understood, for these faculties and qualities are all essential in various ways at the personal, social, and institutional levels of human life. This larger field of view is crucial if moral empowerment is to be the *summum bonum*, the primary goal of education.

PART THREE: THE CONCEPT OF MORAL EMPOWERMENT

“Moral empowerment” is not only the goal of education but also the organizing idea underpinning Farid-Arbab’s conceptual framework. The framework understands the subject at the center of education as a creature with multiple capabilities and qualities but who, in an age of calculation and information, is often characterized as merely cognitive and whose intelligence is thought to be primarily instrumental. In Farid-Arbab’s thinking, instead, reason, understanding, and wisdom are conceived as being integrated with spiritual and moral qualities, perceptual abilities, attitudes, intuition, dispositions, affectivity, and the capacity and power to act.

“All education which develops power to share effectively in social life is moral,” writes John Dewey (360). This is true for Farid-Arbab, as she understands that all education should aim at bettering human life, both for the individual and society. Education conceived as providing a better understanding of the physical and the

social worlds may be a suitable goal of education; but if genuine knowledge involves human capacities that include the dimension of action aimed at transforming life and contributing to society, then education needs to provide more than just an understanding and becomes necessarily moral. It is by way of active engagement with physical reality that science comes to understand the laws and forces at work and, by applying that knowledge, transform the physical parameters of human life. Likewise, an understanding of social reality and the forces, institutions, and patterns at work in that domain requires of learners, not a passive understanding nor—worse still—its application in manipulating others for one’s own benefit, but an engagement with social reality as a process of learning how to transform and improve society. Knowing our physical and social world is not about instrumental purposes, exploitation, or mere employment. Rather, human knowledge carries with it a responsibility that includes understanding and engaging the qualities of our nature that allow us to advance physical and social reality in moral ways.

Being moral means not merely being accountable to academic, intellectual, and practical betterment, but involves the transformation and remaking of the self and society—a process that involves efforts, through personal and group reflection, regarding just what is the best kind of life, for both individuals and the collective. As Dewey said, education should aim

at advancing our understanding of both the ends of human life as well as the means to pursue those ends.

Farid-Arbab works through a Bahá'í understanding of human nature with its view of intellectual, moral, and spiritual capabilities, all inseparable and all of which bear on the process of interaction and encounter between the human subject and objects of understanding. That process of coming to understand reality, taking in natural and social realities with their moral, cultural, and spiritual features, constitutes sound education.

This conception of education sees “doing,” “knowing,” and “being” as inseparable, each necessary to the other. There is an inseparability of the cognitive, moral, and spiritual qualities of the subject that includes perceptual, affective, and volitional capacities—all essential to genuine understanding and moral empowerment. Motivation, commitment, and action are as much a part of genuine understanding as the cognitive or perceptual skills.

Moral empowerment, the aim of education, also describes the process of education. The idea of “moral empowerment” here is not the same as a conventional understanding of values and virtues, nor is it an approach to moral dilemmas and decision-making that are added to the curriculum as ad hoc “moral education” classes. Neither should this concept be confused with the helpful ideas of empowerment that came out of important work in feminism a couple of decades ago, or with the notion used in the field of business

management and human resources. Moral empowerment is put forward in Farid-Arbab's book as the substance or core of all education—scientific, social, religious, and artistic. It has to do with the nature of being human, the nature of understanding as a process that involves all human capabilities, and the active, transformative engagement of the subject with the object of understanding.

Moral empowerment is that which can “enable students to take charge of their own intellectual and moral growth and to contribute to the transformation of society” (Farid-Arbab 13). That sort of agency of the individual correlates with a central theme of modernity, though it is here adjusted and refined. Leaving aside the deformation, if not corruption, of the idea of freedom, the moral autonomy of the individual has been central to modern self-understanding, while freedom and autonomy as key concepts of our agency as human beings have often been ignored in educational plans and programs. Although contested in its interpretation, autonomy arose from the reaction to blind and rigid authority and to unreasonable tradition, superstition, and oppressive domination. Here, the concept of moral empowerment moderates and refines what otherwise, in society, has become an ideal of unfettered liberty and irresponsible freedom.

Two Bahá'í principles reinforce Farid-Arbab's concept of moral empowerment. The first is the principle of the oneness of humanity. The

second is a view of current history that takes our age to be one of transition so overwhelming that it amounts to “the coming of age of the human race” (Shoghi Effendi 183)—hardly an exaggeration in light of the unceasing change in our economic, political, cultural, community, family, and personal lives.

Farid-Arbab analyzes those two principles by looking at two key factors in society: power and oppression. Education is a means of developing a set of capabilities that shifts our understanding of power from an idea of domination to a social dynamic shaped by love, thought and insight, knowledge, service to others, and the resilience and perseverance of people. This account of power differs radically from power defined as brute force or a means to subjugate.

Among its other dimensions, oppression has to do with the monopoly and exploitation of knowledge by the few. To overcome such oppression, universal access to knowledge and its generation and distribution is essential. Education is a primary path to justice and freedom because, by redefining justice as relief from oppression and power, education is a means of releasing human potential and motivating social change in this age of transition. Education does so without predetermining or prescribing the shape that would result from this alternative understanding of power. There is a positive directionality, of course, that such education gives to overcoming oppression and injustice,

but without rigid or preconceived results that, when forced on society, have corrupted well-meaning but ultimately misguided revolutions. Revolutions have tried to coerce social and individual transition without accommodating genuine universal participation where all individuals become protagonists of development as they acquire a sense of their own moral empowerment and learn how to contribute to the community and institutions of society. When allowed to do so, instead, the community and institutions, as collective enterprises, join with individuals as equally respected protagonists of social transformation that is a self-directing and self-correcting learning process aimed at societal well-being.

The principle of the oneness of humanity points to a process of transition to human maturity in which power is redefined and oppression gives way to the power of human character and understanding. In this framework, knowledge is taken to be something that ought to be accessible to all, that informs moral empowerment, and where education includes “being” and “doing” as much as “knowing.”

Dr. Farid-Arbab works through this analysis of power, oppression, and critical consciousness, drawing on works by Steven Lukes and Hannah Arendt and on Antonio Gramsci’s potent development of the process of “false consciousness.” She considers Paulo Freire’s analysis of how normality involves the acceptance of existing injustices and how the development of a sound, critical

consciousness enables us to become aware of our own agency. She notes the limitations of the concepts of these thinkers in which there is an understandable but nearly exclusive emphasis on a critical consciousness centered on overcoming problems, without a more forward-looking pedagogy that empowers students to deal with new configurations of complex reality once identifiable oppression or “false consciousness” is overcome. A more genuinely transformational and evolving pedagogy is required (see, for example, the last half of page 280 in Farid-Arbab). She draws attention to how the book’s conceptual framework introduces a mode of influencing social transformation that lies beyond political power and contestation. It is a learning process that is new in history and that draws on the power of spiritual qualities and the power of education and knowledge as these become ever more universally accessible.

An important observation she makes is that as society transforms and becomes more complex—which it must as it evolves toward oneness—“the scope for the expression of the capacities latent in each human being . . . correspondingly expand[s]. Because the relationship between the individual and society is a reciprocal one, the transformation now required must occur simultaneously within human consciousness and the structure of social institutions” (Farid-Arbab 16).

In Farid-Arbab’s discussion of understanding related to moral empowerment, she draws not only on Bahá’í

views of the human soul but on some compelling ideas in contemporary philosophy that also relate reason to morality. She points out the strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism, Kant’s deontological view, and the views of Charles Taylor. She uses Alasdair MacIntyre’s arguments regarding the tight relationship of practical reason and the practice of virtues, pointing out the shortcomings of the concept of “virtue” compared to the concept of “capabilities.” She presents, over several pages, a helpful comparative analysis of John Rawls’s views on justice and his efforts to overcome utilitarianism and deontological positions, but notes the limitations of his concepts of “fairness” and “veil of ignorance,” given that they rest on the assumption that self-interest is a given. Even the possibility of transcending our self-interest is not something that plays a significant role, if any, in Rawls’s conception of justice. Yet from some perspectives—and certainly this is true of a Bahá’í view of justice—spiritual qualities are directly implicated in how injustice is perceived and how our reasoning then frames actions that might lead to situations of greater justice. Her discussion here might have included reference to MacIntyre’s book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, which, more than his book *After Virtue*, goes deeper into the close relationship between practical reason and different concepts of justice. In some historical periods, spiritual qualities were inseparable from processes of reasoning and collective deliberation about matters of justice and injustice.

PART FOUR: SCIENCE AND RELIGION
IN EDUCATION

In chapters 5, 6, and 7, Farid-Arbab takes up the issue of objects of understanding. Chapter 5 is perhaps the most difficult chapter of the book as it looks at the differences between physical and social reality and makes the point that objectivity does not depend on an ontology of reality that is reduced to the physical. There are different kinds of realities—physical, social, and spiritual—an idea she explains in part by using Thomas Nagel's concept of an "extended reality" that goes beyond both the physical and social reality. While this chapter acknowledges different kinds of objectivity, it raises the challenge of the fragmentation of knowledge in education, a serious issue today. After bringing together a more complete and profound view of understanding, Farid-Arbab sees the unity and integration of the several features that constitute our understanding as a way to think through the integration of the curriculum in a manner that McDowell describes as "openness to the layout of reality" (Farid-Arbab 145).

Needless to say, the complex issues connected to questions of objectivity and the nature of reality in its multiplicity, involving arguments in epistemology and ontology that are contended in contemporary philosophy, cannot be summarized in one chapter, nor can the discussion of the integration of the objects of learning be determined in any final way. Chapters

6 and 7, however, are useful in setting out key concepts, important vocabulary, and the terms by which the issue of integration and pedagogy can be advanced. Yet it is only a beginning to addressing one of the most difficult issues in education.

Chapter 6 is a good overview of the misdirections and predicaments of modernity. It also introduces the challenge of integrating objects of learning, a subject that is then taken up in more detail in chapter 7. Chapter 6 looks especially at the complementarity of science and religion, using insights from John Searle, Thomas Nagel, Bernard Williams, David Bohm, and John McDowell. Farid-Arbab draws on their insights, and especially those of Nagel, in affirming reality as certainly independent of the human mind but also as far more than the mere physical.

Drawing on the work of Larry Laudan and important philosophers of science such as Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, and Imre Lakatos, she discusses the failure of the faith/reason distinction—the basis of the false dichotomy between science and religion. Too often religion is taken to be "blind faith" and science, "reason"; but, as she explains, both are institutions of knowledge. And qualities of faith and reason operate in them both if we really examine, on the one hand, scientific practice through the work of recent philosophy and the history of science and, on the other, if we understand religion by the terms in which the Bahá'í teachings explain its essence.

Among the explorations of this theme, Farid-Arbab relies on insights that demonstrate the inseparability of conceptual, perceptual, and spiritual qualities, drawing on John McDowell's arguments regarding the logical impossibility of distinguishing our perception of the world and our actions, the concepts we have about the world that we necessarily bring to both perception and action. We perceive and we take action as human beings that are always conceptually informed.

The argument of McDowell regarding the inseparable nature of our conceptual involvement with the world and our perception of reality is one that cannot be easily summarized, but Farid-Arbab does it as well as it can be managed in eight pages (230–38). For those interested, the argument began with Kant's observation that "thoughts without content [of an empirical kind] are empty" and "intuitions [or sensations in today's language] without concepts are blind," (Kant 394) and that theme has generated a lively conversation ever since in epistemology, taken up, among others for instance, by Donald Davidson in his criticism of the dualism of conceptual scheme and empirical content.¹

This integration, or interpenetration, of human faculties is reflected in Bahá'u'lláh's comment about the

rational faculty being necessary even to our ability to perceive and understand reality and in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's comments about human faculties, particularly the "common faculty," and human understanding (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 83; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 243–44).

A passage of McDowell, cited and elaborated on by Farid-Arbab, provides a brief illustration of the nature of "spiritual perception," just one of the qualities allied to genuine understanding:

"The reliably kind behaviour" of a kind person "is not the outcome of a blind, not-rational habit or instinct." It has been learned through familiarity with kindness in our upbringing and education. On being kind in each occasion, the kind individual has a reliable sensitivity to the requirement which the situation imposes on behavior. McDowell holds that "the deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge" and "the sensitivity is, we might say, a sort of perceptual capacity." (Farid-Arbab 309)

There are so many things about which to learn—the natural world, society, institutions, tools and technologies of civilization (their use and their misuse)—and all of it takes in the natural, the normative, the cultural, the ethical, the aesthetic, and the spiritual. Many of those objects of understanding and learning go beyond the natural, and

1 See McDowell's *Mind and World*, "Lecture One," pp. 1–23, and Davidson's "Meaning, Truth and Evidence" in *Truth, Language and History*, p. 48.

include the subtleties of language, institutions, patterns of human reality, moral principles, art, literature, and much that has to do with a genuine life of spirituality. They may seem somehow less “real” and less tangible, suffering as we are from the materialistic bias of the age. But they are not. They are just different in kind, essential objects of understanding in their own right, and open to systematic and cumulative treatment in education. There is no end to understanding, no end—for the individual and for the collective—to learning that can advance civilization.

Chapter 6 is helpful in gaining an introduction to the matter of integrating the multiple languages of science, philosophy, the arts, and morality—all of which are indispensable parts of an effective educational program. Certainly, “the language of science does not exhaust meaning,” (Farid-Arbab 187) and religious language is, like science, a language of both meaning and knowledge. The chapter develops a promising view of how religion generates knowledge, not simply by way of the language of religious revelation but in the way of understanding how religious language requires unending social interaction through which we gain an understanding of both religion and social dynamics. The language of religion involves love and understanding, or intersubjective agreement, as with science. It does not contradict science and is amenable to progressive clarification. At the same time, it also uses metaphor and other

devices common to poetry that give rise to multiple meanings at the same time. Religion, too, like science, acknowledges authority—but only once reason and experience assure one of legitimate authority. In one section of the chapter, the complementarity of languages is discussed, noting that the language of religion involves exhortations, stories, poetry, descriptive language, morality, and commandments, as well as vision and love: “education . . . needs to tap the roots of motivation and arouse the noblest of sentiments. It is not clear whether a combination of science, philosophy, the arts, and the humanities can accomplish this task without the language of religion” (Farid-Arbab 190).

Chapter 7 looks at alternative ways of conceiving the curriculum. One possibility, for example, puts social problems at the center of education. Another one divides the curriculum according to the conventional disciplines. Moral empowerment would seem to imply the value of putting concrete problems of human life at the center, and interdisciplinary studies try to do so, as “[t]he knowledge that students must make their own through education cannot be acquired in isolation from . . . the reality of their own lives and of society” (Farid-Arbab 199). However, as Farid-Arbab points out, there is no one-to-one match between disciplines and social problems (200); and the logic or form and development in specific disciplines of knowledge, whether in science or the arts and humanities, can be very

poorly covered in some interdisciplinary studies approaches, and a sound mastery of pertinent disciplines can be neglected if the formal logic of the disciplines is ignored.

A better approach to integration starts by focusing on the concept of “capability,” and chapter 8 does that. With the integration in our understanding of spiritual and moral qualities, attitudes, information, habits, and skills, a broader idea of rationality is available by which education can approach the curriculum by moving between the understanding of disciplines and the understanding of concrete problems, between thought and action. After all, because the concrete is always conceptual but also engaged with the other qualities of the spirit and mind, where heart and head are not separate, action relative to problems, and sound regard and respect for disciplines are not mutually exclusive. As Farid-Arbab explains, “The conception of capability serves to integrate theoretical and practical knowledge” (274).

PART FIVE: EXTENDED REALITY AND HUMAN CAPACITIES

The subject who understands objects of learning embarks on a process that is without end and embedded in relationships with other individuals, the community, with its norms and its culture, as well as the institutions of society, nature, technology, and God. All these relationships between the self and reality in its different forms

are ones that education ought to address properly.

A relationship offers something that textbooks or purely propositional knowledge—as important as they are—cannot offer, because understanding involves a relationship between the complete human being (the subject) and all those human faculties that bear on true insight and make for a spiritual and moral relationship with it, as well as attitudinal and affective capacities, as they are educated, and a perceptual relationship to realities beyond the physical one.

Education, then, should equip the learner with the motivation, the power, and the capacity to contribute to the transformation and advancement of society, as well as oneself, and that involves instilling in the subject an appreciation and comprehension of the integrated intellectual, moral, and spiritual capacities of the complete person. Those capacities include the power to act, but with an understanding of “power” as a strength borne of noble goals and carried forward by noble character—the range of qualities that distinguish and dignify the human person—and that, as a consequence, redounds to the quality of collective life in the human community.

The concept of “capability” as developed in Farid-Arbab’s framework is of central importance. It is an effective and practical way to think about, and plan, education. Farid-Arbab draws on a statement of FUNDAEC where “capability” is defined as the “developed capacity to think and act in a particular

sphere of activity and according to an explicit purpose” and such capabilities refer to “complex spheres of thought and action” (265). One way of gaining some idea of what “capability” means is to think of it as a heuristic device, or as “a strategy to organize elements of a curriculum” (265–66). A “capability . . . is developed progressively as one acquires a set of interrelated skills and abilities, assimilates the necessary information, advances in the understanding of relevant concepts, and acquires certain attitudes, habits and spiritual qualities” (265). One can think of Amartya Sen’s idea of “capability” as a “combination of functionings” and “attainments” (Sen 233) or how MacIntyre develops his idea of “practices” in *After Virtue*. However, both of those approaches do not get at the idea of capability well enough. Farid-Arbab proposes that capability be used as a heuristic device, or as a “strategy to organize elements of a curriculum” (265–66).

The value of this concept, however, is that it is at the right scale for developing educational objectives, and too rigorous a definition may prevent its heuristic value. It is neither too general or too large or so narrow and precise as to make difficult the practical work of laying out an educational program. It carries enough ambiguity and generality to take into account the nature of the subject and the range of human faculties involved in understanding. The concept of capabilities is a sound and effective way to think about the process of education. As capabilities

are acquired and advanced, the subject is on the road to moral empowerment. Capability is a concept employed by two highly regarded thinkers, Nussbaum and Sen. Farid-Arbab explores their use of the term, noting that her development of the concept differs in some important respects from theirs.

Learning is more effective when the student loves what he or she is trying to learn. It could be about understanding the natural world or society; understanding how the economy functions, how people relate to each other and to themselves, or how cars or houses are built, how engineers work, how to do arithmetic; or understanding our relation to God and the divine world. In addition, whatever kinds of learning in which we happen to engage, the process of understanding is enhanced if qualities and attitudes of respect, honesty, and integrity are employed in the process. With the exercise of perseverance and love of what we are studying, along with an attitude and emotions that serve to enhance our awareness and perception, our memory and imagination, the pursuit of learning and trying to understand something is never merely cognitive. One’s learning is aided if one is honest with oneself and with others about what one has been able to grasp, or not, if one approaches the object of learning with humility, but also with courage and resolve, and with faith that, by working hard, one will, in fact, learn something valuable.

One of the great motivations to our learning is our own curiosity and the

thirst we all have to know more about things. Curiosity is an important principle in the conceptual framework, as is motivation and its relationship to our attraction to beauty. If beauty and knowledge come together, as apparently mathematics does for mathematicians I know, and music does for musicians, then our understanding is quickened and advanced.

These considerations are essential to an adequate understanding of Farid-Arbab's book. That range of factors in understanding an object of learning are far more than simply factors that enable learning. The human being is one person, and the range of human faculties—understanding, perception, affectivity, memory, and imagination—are all part of that understanding as are spiritual qualities.

As Gardner's work *Multiple Intelligences* explains, interpersonal intelligence involves the capability of perceiving others' feelings, which allows an individual to really understand the other person in deeper ways, to know how to raise their spirits with the right comment or how to interact with them and love them. As the subject grows in his or her understanding of the wider community, he or she learns how to ask the right question of a group, which might lead to devising a project that helps move the community forward in its plans.

Kuhn describes the way in which scientists, as they learn more about the object of their research, come to "see" the phenomenon in a way that is intimate and familiar, whether it means

understanding what one sees looking through the microscope at cells or perceiving a confirmation, or an anomaly, in an experiment. This is similar to social perception, coming to perceive others in a different conceptual manner, really "seeing" them as they are, not at some reflective remove. This learned capability of perception is linked to understanding, where spiritual and moral sensibilities impact even the perception of reality.

The imagination, too, comes into play, for instance for the medical researcher conceiving of the best experiment to tease out the factors that lead to asthma or the kind of imagination by which the love of geometry in a grade school student might prompt her to devise an alternative, but still sound, proof to the one in the textbook. These modest references are meant simply to give an idea of how relationships—when one stops to consider the multiple and very different kinds of objects in that reality that extends far beyond the physical—involve our understanding with a set of qualities beyond the informational and cognitive if we are to navigate, learn, and enrich the quality of those relationships. This sense of what understanding an object of learning entails does not merely uphold a worthwhile educational aim, but is at the heart of what it means to understand and be educated.

William Wordsworth's poem *The Prelude* is a striking account in Western literature of human consciousness as it learns and develops

its understanding. Wordsworth described the poem as one that reflected the growth of his mind. Helen Vendler, in writing about that poem, notes that there is always an “incessant cooperation of the senses, the mind and the heart” for it is entirely “artificial [the] isolation from one another of perception, thought and passion.” As Farid-Arbab emphasizes, understanding is much more than cognitive, and this is as true of the scientist as it is of the writer or poet.

Nobel laureate and cytogeneticist Barbara McClintock is one among hundreds of scientists who have talked eloquently about this, referring to her great love for corn plants and the reality of genetic processes. She almost literally got inside the process of genetic reproduction, and her understanding and scientific output reflect as much.² How can one separate the process of understanding of those who become expert practitioners of science or art, industry or social service, between features that are strictly cognitive and those that are more affective, attitudinal, perceptual, and active in the ways of one who “knows” the objective reality of his or her educated capabilities?

Our understanding, then, is intimate with spiritual and moral capacities. It is joined, by way of the rational soul, with the perceptual capacities, affective capacities, and intuitive and inspired ways of the human spirit.

² See Evelyn Fox Keller's *A Feeling for the Organism*.

Farid-Arbab's approach goes beyond the valuable research into different kinds of intelligences or “frames of mind” of Gardner; or the “emotional intelligence” made popular by Daniel Goleman, though more effectively explained by Ronald de Sousa in his book *The Rationality of Emotions*; or the “fast” and “slow” thinking that Daniel Kahneman analyzed and made popular in his book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, though those insights are also ones that Farid-Arbab might well have drawn on, as each, in their own way, are valuable contributions to this expanded view of how we understand and reason. Yet these are all still only partial views of the concept of understanding that Farid-Arbab has begun to explore. The heart and the head are indeed inseparable—the human being cannot be split down the middle—and the combination of faculties of the human soul are all intimate with what should be understood to constitute intelligence.

To summarize, intelligence, as Farid-Arbab states, should be understood “broadly as the combined capacity of a number of interacting faculties of the human soul,” which means that “[t]here is an infinite dimension to understanding” (79, 75). “[T]he power of the mind is not sensible, nor are any of the human attributes: These are intelligible realities. . . . Likewise, nature itself is an intelligible and not a sensible reality; the human spirit is an intelligible and not a sensible reality” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá qtd. in Farid-Arbab 148–49).

CONCLUSION

Moral Empowerment closes with a chapter on the continuity of thought, language, and action, and the inseparable qualities of heart and head, as well as the essential interplay between the individual and the collective. The chapter is an apt ending for a book that contains so many different ideas, brought together, in a conceptual framework that speaks to the overall oneness of the subject as a soul, the oneness of those various qualities that inform our understanding, and the oneness of reality in all its multiplicity and diversity.

When we understand that the unity and integration of our thought, language, and action—the oneness of our capacities working in harmony and with a moral purpose—we can begin to see a way to overcoming the superficial language of modern culture that tends to dichotomize and divide, our feelings from our thoughts, our actions from our values, a culture that fragments our being, and the unity of our being with our knowing and our doing.

Throughout the Bahá'í Writings we are urged to “ponder in [our] heart” (for instance in *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, sections 18 and 82, and in many other tablets) and, with respect to the transcendent world, to both “know and love God.” In other words, the heart and the head, knowledge and love (and a host of other spiritual qualities), are not separate from our understanding. What we really know the most about, if we

pause to reflect, are those things in life that we understand and that we are attracted to—those in which our whole sense of being and our qualities of acting and doing come together with our knowing. That is genuine education. Even though this idea is so often acknowledged as important by teachers and parents and in commencement addresses at universities, there is a failure to systematize any conceptual framework that would invite genuine and cumulative progress in our being able to think about education through all those dimensions with clarity and with an honest relationship to the building of curriculum and pedagogical methods and processes. The conceptual framework presented in Farid-Arbab's book addresses this inadequacy and contributes to moving education forward.

In His writings, Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us: “Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom” (*Gleanings* 122:1). There is evidently much about the potential of the human being that we do not yet know. The current materialistic approach to human capacity, even if it does admit that there may be a much greater potential than has yet been realized, invariably sees it as amounting to little more than anticipating an increase in computational and information processing ability, or some other enhancement in purely cognitive capacities. Bahá'u'lláh's statement that “Man is the supreme Talisman”

(*Gleanings* 122:1), instead, hints at human capabilities beyond a more highly trained flesh-and-blood computer and certainly something more than a highly evolved animal, two popular views of human reality. The range of capacities—cognitive, attitudinal, perceptual, affective, moral, and spiritual—that distinguish the human subject of learning in Farid-Arbab's view brings to mind powers of the human being that go beyond current conceptions of human nature and potential. The conceptual framework explored by Farid-Arbab heightens the meaning of the entire passage cited earlier: "Man is the supreme Talisman. A lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess" (*Gleanings* 122:1).

This particular passage from Bahá'u'lláh's writings, which inspires many adherents of the Bahá'í Faith in their own educational work, goes on to point out the social or collective dimension that education must entail: "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom." And the passages goes on to say that the "purpose is that all men shall be regarded as one soul."

Thus it is that Farid-Arbab closes out her last chapter by commenting on the importance of the individual and the collective when she says that "the student should be immersed in the life of society" (310). The concept of moral empowerment addresses that division. Our mind itself develops in

a social context and by way of language. The relationship of language, thought, action, and the objective reality that makes up the human world today encompasses the entire globe. People are embedded in the entire world, not just in their local communities. Our consciousness of the oneness of humanity—and our actions to uphold and advance the reality expressed by that principle—is more important than ever and constitutes what moral empowerment needs to embody in today's world.

In the modern era, Dewey's work has been perhaps the most comprehensive effort at developing a general philosophy of education, though others, like Bruner, have worked with the same goal. They have understood that a general philosophy of education has to take into account a multitude of factors essential in educational decisions, from purposes to pedagogy, from the relation between the individual and the community to the economy, and to the norms and values that enable one not only to function in society as a mature individual but also to influence the transformation of that society.

The conceptual framework outlined by Farid-Arbab goes a long way toward providing such a philosophy of education using the tool of a framework of concepts that can serve as a kind of heuristic or guide to further research and educational practice. Her analysis represents impressive intellectual labor, examining, as it does, the meaning and implications of the framework and its concepts while

bringing them into a helpful engagement with insights from a range of thinkers.

The fundamental problem that Dewey, Bruner, and other educational philosophers have faced is how to develop a coherent philosophy of education able to respond adequately to the problems of modernity while yet situated in a modernity undergoing constant change. Like others, Dewey knew that traditional ways of education, derived from a host of bygone patterns of schooling and training, with influences from both religious instructional formats and management disciplines patterned on industrial production of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had to give way to new approaches if education was to meet the challenge of the emergence of science and democracy and the complexity of economic, cultural, social, and political revolutions that have characterized the last two to three centuries. The conceptual framework examined in Farid-Arbab's book doesn't attempt to reflect any predetermined shape of society as it evolves, nor does the framework reflect a fixed form of education, whether relying on an overdetermined idea of the subject (or student), a psychologically limited idea of understanding or learning, or a categorical idea of the object (curriculum) of understanding. Rather, she works from a capacious idea of human nature and its potential, and instead of having a precise outcome of societal change in mind, she draws on general principles that simply provide some

sense of the future directionality of human civilization.

In this sustained reflection on the conceptual framework pursued by FUNDAEC in Colombia and in the Bahá'í community in a more general way, now articulated by Farid-Arbab at a philosophical level, we have then the fundamentals of a promising research program. It is neither superficial, narrow, or fashionable. It neither lists a series of points that are mere technique, nor portrays itself as one more educational model among many that too often lack well-conceived and well-argued foundations. Rather, it contributes to an expanding, productive, and collective research program in education.

The book can serve as a catalyst for further development of the framework. Farid-Arbab looks at the concepts and their interrelationships, not so much from the perspective of someone who takes those concepts for granted because of her religious beliefs—though her faith in their soundness is understood—but rather from the perspective of insights from other educators and philosophers that help her justify the framework.

Moral Empowerment is a successful effort that expands what education conventionally understands of the nature and potential of the learner, what is understood of the process of understanding or learning, and what is the range of physical, social, and spiritual reality that ought to comprise the aims of education if we are to take advantage of the full potential of human

beings and help all people to a greater level of moral empowerment.

As Wordsworth wrote about the growth of his own mind in *The Prelude*, what we have loved,

Others will love, and we will
teach them how;

Instruct them how the mind
of man becomes

A thousand times more
beautiful than the earth

On which he dwells, above
this frame of things

(Which, 'mid all revolution
in the hopes

And fears of men, doth still
remain unchanged)

In beauty exalted, as it is
itself

Of quality and fabric more
divine. (14.2.446–54)

WORKS CITED

- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Some Answered Questions*. US Bahá'í Publishing, 2016.
- Bahá'u'lláh. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. US Bahá'í Publishing, 2005.
- Davidson, Donald. *Truth, Language and History*. Oxford UP, 2005.
- Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education*. The Free Press, 1916.
- Farid-Arbab, Sona. *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*. US Bahá'í Publishing, 2016.
- Fox Keller, Evelyn. *A Feeling for the Organism*. W. H. Freeman, 1983.
- Gardner, Howard. *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice*. Basic Books, 1993.
- Kahneman, Daniel. *Thinking Fast and Slow*. Macmillan, 2012.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason (abridged)*. The Modern Library, 1960.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. U of Notre Dame P, 1981.
- . *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* U of Notre Dame P, 1988.
- McDowell, John. *Mind and World*. Harvard UP, 1994.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *Upheavals of Thought*. Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Putnam, Hilary. *Ethics without Ontology*. Harvard UP, 2004.
- Sen, Amartya. *The Idea of Justice*. Harvard UP, 2009.
- Shoghi Effendi. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991.
- Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind: An Autobiographical Poem*. D. Appleton & Co., 1850.
- Vendler, Helen. "I Heard Voices in My Head." *The New York Review of Books*, 23 February 2017.