

**ESOTERIC ANTHROPOLOGY:
"DEVOLUTIONARY" AND "EVOLUTIONARY"
ORIENTATIONS IN PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY**

Sheldon R. Isenberg and Gene R. Thursby

Introduction

Humanity as a whole has never been in so precarious a position. We live under daily threat from pollution, polarization, and potential global destruction. Ours is a time of extraordinary crisis. But few notice one of the deepest roots of this crisis. It is not just that "we" do not understand "them", it is also that we do not understand ourselves. There is a *crisis of understanding* underlying the very points of view which we designate as "modern", for inherent to late modern thought is a radical skepticism about the possibility of understanding anything or anyone.

The *modern* world is a stage in a process in which humanity has, at least on the surface, eliminated the myths and metaphysics of traditional culture, and since the eighteenth century the release from the past has been made palpable in a devotion to autonomous reason and technical progress. But the unprecedented brutality of war and the unforeseen consequences of an unbridled technology have called into question the human hope to create a heaven on earth. So we find in recent patterns of thought a questioning of the optimism and the simplistic anthropologies which were characteristic of the early modern period. In the current stage of modernity we find a despair accompanying the belief that we cannot really *understand* what it is we might find worth saving from this crisis — for thoroughgoing moderns there can be no clear notion about what it would mean to "save" humanity.

One consequence of this modern spiritual dead-end is a reaction which has taken the form of a flourishing anti-intellectualism manifested in superstitious techniques to ward off fears, in naive

fundamentalism, and in authoritarian cults. Another consequence is increased interest in non-Western spiritual movements which, whatever their own effectiveness, typically have not yet come to terms with modernity. So neither the advocates of reactionary nativism nor those who endorse imported traditionalism have been able to offer the means of integration necessary to take us beyond the contradictions that threaten to destroy us.

However, there is a different standpoint, calling itself a "perennial philosophy", which claims to transcend the paradigm of modernity by comprehension rather than merely to oppose it. This claim must seem paradoxical or nonsensical, or course, in the context of the modern commitment to dialectic and the modern denial of transcendence. It inevitably provokes puzzlement in moderns — a consequence of an image of human nature and possibility which is characteristic of modernity, and which perennial philosophy sees as constricted and incomplete.

The purpose of this paper is to delineate over and against some modern images the main features of a perennial anthropology — the human image which is an aspect of the comprehensive paradigm entailed by "perennial philosophy" — in order to provide a basis from which to begin an intelligent consideration of the claim that the transcendent perspective of perennial philosophy offers a significant critique of modernity and vital guidance for moving beyond it. We believe that this "perennial" perspective offers a valuable critical tool for assessing our current situation — one that comprehends and transcends the despair of relativism, on the one hand, while preserving respect for esoteric orthodoxies and promising a freedom beyond their psychic bonds, on the other.

The perspective we will consider has been presented in Europe most notably in the writings of René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, and their associates; and in the United States by Huston Smith and more recently by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. In addition to these writers, and others who consider Guénon or Schuon their teachers, there are others who claim connection to the perennial philosophy, and who represent what we might term different recensions. Yet all of them seek to articulate a standpoint which finds its basis in unitive mysticism, and so they affirm a convergence of perspectives among those who follow any authentic path of mystical ascent to a certain level of experience. These contemporary philosophers seek to draw from a common core of knowledge which is the foundation of all of the great religious traditions. Their writing, therefore, is not so much characterized by a devotion to novelty as by repeated references to a large but nevertheless delimited

set of traditional teachers, including Neo-Platonists, Hermetics, Advaita Hindus, Mahayana Buddhists, Sufi Muslims, and Christian and Jewish mystics.

Our procedure will be to begin the treatment of our topic by making some general observations about modernity as a distinctive perspective or paradigm. We will indicate some of its general features and focus on the human image integral to it. We shall then shift to the human image associated with the perennial anthropology, which is shared by two "recensions" of perennial philosophy — the first of which is identified with those who acknowledge the influence of Guénon and Schuon. Secondly, we shall distinguish between the recensions by noting the differences in their approaches to modernity, and will conclude with a brief discussion of what differences those differences make.

Perspectives and Anthropologies

Human art, myths, and philosophies are obvious testimonies to the simple truth that we humans have always been fascinated (if not obsessed) by questions about ourselves. Our myths narrate the stories of how and why we got here, while our philosophies define and analyze what makes us human. Contemporary metaphysician Oscar Ichazo connects the overall process of human thought to our long quest to find out who we are:

Man has defined himself as 'Homo sapiens', the man who thinks. Throughout all history, the question of reason, or how human beings think, has been permanently posed before our eyes. If there is a difference between us human beings and all that is not human in nature, it is this: We are the only creatures who question their own identity.¹

Three patterns which are typical in intelligent reflection on human nature, and which may be used as headings under which most approaches to philosophical discussion of human identity may be grouped, are (philosophical) sociology, anthropology, and cosmology. Ethicist Alisdair MacIntyre asserts that moral philosophy "characteristically presupposes a sociology".² Endorsing MacIntyre's observation, we expand it by noting that models of human nature and of society, in general, tend to be transforms of one another and tend to imply matching cosmologies.³ Therefore, study of a particular philosophical anthropology will anticipate much of what we would find in the same case in the other two aspects of the image or paradigm. Humans are embedded in societies, both of which are embedded in a cosmos.

Our strategy in this paper will be to examine the human images revealed by and underlying the perspectives of modernity and of perennial philosophy. Although any underlying image has crucial implications, the image itself tends to be tacit. Our perceptions arise *from* points of view. We see ourselves, each other, and other things within a given (and/or achieved) perspective; a human image underlies every human perspective. The task, then, is to discern at the root of the perspective characteristic of modernity the beliefs about human nature, society, and the cosmos from which humanity exists.

The pattern of human identity conferred by the operating human image, and certainly the lived or vital sense of humanity correlated with it, constitutes the most fundamental paradigm for thought about and life in a society — the set of beliefs and assumptions which establish the parameters within which relationships are realized and enacted. Ordinarily we relate to each other on the basis of who we believe we and they now are and can become. We attribute knowledge to ourselves and to others within the limits of what we believe is known and knowable. The perennialist critique of modernity can be summarized in the assertion that the typically modern human image is truncated and thereby dangerously distorted.

The Human Image in Modernity

There is no lack of contemporary sensitivity to the poverty of the modern human image. For example, neo-Freudian Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse has laid bare the damage that modern socio-economic structures inflict in their reduction of humanity to a "one dimensional man", and psychologist Floyd Matson has evoked the plight of modern man in terms of a "broken image". But it is not our intention to review and categorize these variations on the typically modern description of human nature. Instead we shall focus on what perennialists consider to be two quintessentially modern movements, both of them connected to the rise and total pervasiveness of scientific method and its attendant technology. The first is positivism, and the second hermeneutics. Positivism, rooted in the paradigm of seventeenth — through early twentieth century science, has its wider expression in scientism. Hermeneutics, rooted in a rejection of the metaphysics implicit in positivism, receives expression in historicism. From a perennialist perspective, however, both are reductionist.

Positivism, Scientism, and Materialism: Humanity as One-Dimensional

Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is an incisive account of the historical development of positivism, the philosophical position founded on total confidence in the physical sciences as our pipeline to reality.⁴ The metaphor which captures its underlying anthropology is that of "mind as mirror", which contains the notion that our knowledge is a function of our ability to represent physical reality in our minds: "Without the notion of mind as mirror, the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation would not have suggested itself".⁵ Underlying this metaphor is a cosmology that includes only one level, that of physical reality. Thus all search for truth, for knowledge, is about our impressions of and pictures of that part of reality available to us through our senses or the extensions of our senses which we construct through our technology. The meanings of our sentences depend on our capacity to "verify" — to specify behavioural protocols which will yield sense impressions to confirm or deny the accuracy of the representations expressed by the words.

Rorty, however, is also concerned with the next stage required by any representationalist philosophy, the necessity to specify the proper functioning of our representational machinery, our minds. The modern philosophers in the analytic movement, hard on the heels of positivism, devoted themselves to considering just how we can best clarify and evaluate our perceptions and how we can most unequivocally communicate them. They installed epistemology as the monitor, the super-critic, of all science just as the positivists established science as the model for all knowledge. The result, of course, was scientism, which Joseph Bleicher defines in this way:

Scientism, as I use the term, would entail a commitment to one or more of the following tenets: science deals with 'facts' given independently of the researcher; the empiric-analytic method is the only valid mode of knowledge-acquisition; that this method should be extended to all spheres of cognitive activity; that its results are the only true form of knowledge.⁶

Consonant with positivism and scientism, then, is materialism as a metaphysical position. The anthropology of materialism asserts that all existents, including humanity, are matter. The very minds making such assertions are either epiphenomenal or should not be spoken of as "existing" at all:

Materialism is the name given to a family of doctrines concerning the nature of the world which give to matter a primary position and accord to mind (or spirit) a secondary, dependent reality or even none at all. Extreme materialism asserts that the real world consists of material things, varying in their states and relations, and nothing else.⁷

A particular form of materialism called "physicalism" espoused by Paul Feyerabend, Hilary Putnam, and Herbert Feigl defines what we experience as variations of interior awareness as "in fact" neither more nor less than states of the nervous system. With the adoption of physicalism, the reduction of humanity to one dimension, one level of reality, is completed: to be human is to be a body living for a limited time in a universe of bodies and space.

Materialism as a modern cosmology corresponds to a belief that what we can know is limited to the patterns established by the material sciences. As limiting as some have found such a model, it is nevertheless consistent with the affirmation that we can know, we can understand; that we can describe the world, and, with appropriate methodology we can describe ourselves. Self-understanding under this paradigm corresponds, of course, to behaviourism, the doctrine that we are what we do, with "doing" taken as physical action, verbal action — whatever is available to any readily trained observer. The identity question here is never "Who am I" but rather "What are the behaviour patterns observed, and how do they change when variables (which are likely to be physico-chemical factors) are manipulated". Nevertheless, even within this limitation of identity to observable behaviours, the belief is that we can know what is actually there to be known, and that what cannot be caught in this particular net simply isn't there to be caught. No ghosts inhabit this machine, but we can describe the elements and assembly of the machinery.

Hermeneutics, Relativism, and the Rejection of Positivism

Perennialists tend to accept most features of the critiques of positivism offered by pragmatism, existentialism, and hermeneutics. But in their rejections of positivism, these other philosophical orientations reveal aspects of their positions including their implicit, as well as explicit, anthropologies, which differ significantly from the perennialist estimate of humanity. Neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty once again provides an admirable epitome of this expression of modernity. His rejection of positivism does not constitute a rejection of materialism:

Every speech, thought, theory, poem, composition, and philosophy will turn out to be completely predictable in purely naturalistic terms. Some atoms-and-the-void account of micro-processes within individual human beings will permit the prediction of every sound or inscription which will ever be uttered. There are no ghosts.⁸

Yet Rorty has strong interests in promoting conversation, and so for him the materialist, even physicalist, assumptions do not get the interpretive weight which others are likely to accord them. Although he believes it possible to specify the neural causal network of our thoughts, emotions, and dreams, that does not complete the material reduction of human thought:

The secret in the poet's heart remains unknown to the secret police, despite their ability to predict his every thought, utterance, and movement by monitoring his cerebroscope which he must wear day and night. We can know which thoughts pass through a man's mind without understanding them.⁹

Predicting is one kind of behaviour we can manifest; understanding is another type of behaviour. But understanding also systematically surpasses measuring and predicting — we can measure and predict without understanding; we can come to understand the unpredictable. This distinction, exemplified by Rorty, amounts to a rejection of a positivist-analytic perspective that restricts "meaningful" statements to those which have a behaviourally or materially verifiable referent, when "verifiable" is taken in a modern, scientific causal sense which also entails (predictive power or) predictability.

Obviously Rorty intends to reject all forms of philosophical idealism. In fact, he writes in the hope that we will come to see the "mind-body" problem as a confusion (rather than a problem) arising from bad philosophical technique which perpetrated a misleading reification of straightforward human behavioural processes — thinking, dreaming, understanding, etc. In fact, he would have everyone get out of the business of playing with such categories as "ontology", "realities", "consciousness", "mental" — and "material", so long as we mean by 'material' "that which is non-mental". For Rorty argues that such categorizations rely on the baseless belief that we can meaningfully make such distinctions. Instead, such categorizations are no more than habits we exhibit in conversations about our experiences.

Rorty rejects positivism and the positivistic version of the

analytic position on language not so much because of a concern about reductionism, but for two other reasons. First and crucial, he rejects the overarching belief of positivism that sentences can represent things "as they are", so that we could then evaluate expressions in relation to experiences of "things as they are" uncontaminated by the very language we are trying to evaluate. That is, Rorty claims that the descriptions of phenomena by scientists, and the evaluation of those descriptions by epistemologists who claim to have some special knowledge about how people — especially scientists — know, are *just another kind of description, and not foundational* to any other. To illustrate his point: when Gertrude Stein says, "A rose is a rose is a rose. . .," that assertion is not translatable to a chemist's report that chemical analysis of petals from two separate roses reveals identical chemical components. The language of poetry and the language of chemistry are two different ways of speaking and are likely to belong in two different conversations. Neither is foundational to the other, neither can be determined to be ontologically superior; nor does it make sense to claim in general that one is epistemologically superior in the sense that one "really" describes the rose, and the other is "merely" a metaphorical statement about the "real" rose, or in the sense that the "chemical analysis" inevitably misses the "essence" of the rose. So, if we take physics to be the paradigmatic science of positivism and then look at the comments of atomic and sub-atomic physicists on their own enterprise, we are struck by the clarity with which the scientists themselves recognize the *indirection* of their experimentation, the lack of direct, uninterpreted experience of what is under study. Sir Arthur Eddington puts it most effectively, when he observes, "The physical atom is, like everything else in physics, a schedule of pointer readings".¹⁰

Rorty's conclusion is that all human "knowledge" is interpretation, and none of it can be foundational. His rejection of positivism is entailed by his rejection of the "correspondence theory" of language:

We have to drop the notion of correspondence for sentences as well as for thoughts, and see sentences as connected with other sentences rather than with the world. We have to see the term 'corresponds to how things are' as an automatic compliment paid to successful normal discourse rather than as a relation to be studied and aspired to. . . .¹¹

In short, knowledge is a language affair, and language is at root a social activity. Rorty in this way shifts into the characteristic

stance of hermeneutics. We and our world are largely created and dominated by languages. As human selves, we are constituted by our languages and by the conversations in which we are participants. Languages are human achievements, and in turn we conceive our experiences through their grids. Insofar as we describe we *create* (rather than correctly or falsely *represent*); insofar as we offer descriptions of ourselves, we imagine and invent ourselves. On this theme Rorty approvingly quotes Peirce:

Man makes the word, and the word means nothing which the man has not made it mean, and that only to some other man. But . . . man can think only by means of words or other external symbols. . . . [T]he word or sign which man uses is the man himself. . . . [T]hus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought.¹²

Rorty's formulation ties together the seemingly diverse strands of modern thought in American pragmatism, European existentialism, and post-structuralist hermeneutics. His success in disposing of the specifically positivist use of "scientific method" as foundational for all other knowledge-claims and indeed of the general notion that due to privileged sensorial access any type of knowledge-claim can be foundational to any other, leaves him holding the position that all knowledge is irreducibly interpretive. Further all interpretation is relative to a given community of interpreters, and so all knowledge-claims are integral to the activity of on-going conversation with a community of interpreters — all of whom share (perhaps tacitly) certain unprovable premises.

The result is that we must come to view all "facts" as products of a pre-existing perspective, hence as "theory-laden"; i.e., our very portioning-out of experience to designate this or that a "fact" is already an interpretive, a hermeneutical enterprise. Truth and knowledge, in this perspective, are not attributes of "factual" statements, but are categories produced by and utilized within a locus of conversants — which is and can only be within particular realms of human intersubjectivity. Therefore, this interpretive framework implicitly detaches the human appetite for knowledge and meaning from the grossly material realm, from body, and attaches it (without acknowledging the fact) to the mental realm, to symbol-making and linguistic interchange. As Nelson Goodman says, no longer can we delude ourselves with the belief that we find our worlds — we make them.¹³

The Limits of Intersubjectivity: Reality as Conversations

This modern philosophical anthropology conceives of us as living in a one-storeyed building filled with an indeterminate numbers of rooms shared by like-minded interpreters. 'Reality' means consensus among conversants; it is a probably local and always phenomenal reality, cooked-up according to the prevailing tastes. If the man is the thought, as Peirce said, then, as Sartre averred (although from the perspective that "the man is the consciously chosen action") there is nothing essentially human. We are who we think we are. Humanity is, and can be known, only as constantly in flux. Rorty's imagery captures the spirit of this perspective:

. . . there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to such conventions.¹⁴

And as for the sociological consequence of a community of persons believing in (and from) such an anthropology: "A post-Philosophical culture, then, would be one in which men and women felt themselves alone, merely finite, with no links to something Beyond".¹⁵ In such a vision which locates the sources of meaning, truth, and value in social consensus, culture must be viewed as a great game, a common delusion, which most (but not all) people play while believing that it is real.

Similar visions come out of psychoanalysis. Ernest Becker in his later works, especially *The Denial of Death*,¹⁶ makes an extraordinarily powerful analysis which links our attachment to our cultural hero systems, i.e., our consensus realities, to our effort to mask the fear of dying experienced by our threatened egos. He describes the dynamics of those gross obsessional neuroses which he believes constitute the totality of our character structures and cultures. In fact, his accounts sound remarkably like Hindu descriptions of *maya* or Buddhist descriptions of *duhkha*. But there are differences. For now, we can note the major difference that Becker's cosmology is materialist, with our inner processes perceived as anomalous in the universe. Since we are unable to cope with the material realities most powerfully symbolized by death, mind is and must be disconnected from the truths of physical existence and can do no more than to reflect itself in an endless hall of mirrors.

So the recognition of the inability of mind and reason to represent what we experience leads to images of despair — when

that recognition comes from a perspective that assumes that there is only body left when mind is subtracted or abstracted. Sartrean nausea combines with psychoanalytic reality-testing in this dramatic cosmology offered by Becker:

Creation is a nightmare spectacular taking place on a planet that has been soaked for hundreds of millions of years in the blood of all its creatures. The soberest conclusion that we could make about what has been actually taking place on the planet for about three billion years is that it is being turned into a vast pit of fertilizer. But the sun distracts our attention, always baking the blood dry, making things grow over it. . . . [W]hatever man does on this planet has to be done with the lived truth of the terror of creation, of the grotesque, of the rumble of panic underneath everything. Otherwise it is false. Whatever is achieved must be achieved from within the subjective energies of creatures.¹⁷

The recognition of the ultimate impotence of the human mind in the face of the vast, impersonally brutal physicality of existence is enough to elicit Becker's agreement with Otto Rank's "option for the irrational as the basis of life; it is an option based on empirical experience". All that we have left, then, are illusions, new heroisms, new immortality projects "grounded in healthy repressions", i.e., functional but self-deluding lies. The terror of this situation "can only be gone beyond with the creation of new heroisms that are basically matters of belief and will. . . ." ¹⁸

All these images which deny the adequation of mind to experience, or deny mind altogether, lead to such relativisms. Once modern philosophers narrow truth-claims to knowledge within the material realm, and then proceed to take even the security blanket of that knowledge away at the limits of scientism — as well as at the limits of our ability to perceive the physical — we are left with nothing but our suffering subjectivities. For while they have rejected the model of physical science as foundational for knowing, they have retained its materialist cosmologies and thus maintain their physicalist anthropologies. What we find many modern philosophies share is their materialism, and where they differ is about whether or not we can know anything directly about the material world. The obvious analogy is the situation in theoretical physics when Einsteinian relativism began to replace the security of the Newtonian worldview, then was further qualified by the indeterminacy and indescribability of the new particle physics.

It seems to the modern that the closer we look for the "building

blocks" of knowledge, the less we are able to say that we can really know. The more we look out at the world, the more we are forced to look in and ask about who it is that wants to know. And yet, from the hermeneutical perspective, when we look inside, we are still tied to the historically generated criteria of our communities to interpret the results. What we see inside can only be a reflex of what we have been taught to perceive from the outside. Alisdair MacIntyre declares that in ethics *emotivism*, the doctrine that moral claims have no principal referents but are ultimately dependent on our personal choices of values, is the quintessentially modern view and part of the belief-structures of moralists and social philosophers as diverse as Nietzsche, Sartre, Max Weber, and Erving Goffman.

Put in terms of our concern about anthropology, the assumption is that human points of view and value choices *precede* human judgments on particular issues. One does not make judgments by seeing a situation and applying independently existing moral principles, but rather we see the situation *through* the screen of our conditioned value systems. Moral discourse, then, is reduced from discussion of value to competition by already determined wills which are seeking to convince and control each other:

[E]valuative utterance can in the end have no point or use but the expression of my own feelings and attitudes to others (hence "emotivism"). I cannot genuinely appeal to impersonal criteria, for there are no impersonal criteria. . . . The sole reality of distinctively moral discourse is the attempt of one will to align the attitudes, feelings, preferences and choices of another with its own. Others are always means, never ends.¹⁹

The point is that while MacIntyre may disagree with Rorty on important issues, and while both would disagree with Becker's neo-Freudian rhetoric, nonetheless they share a common anthropological paradigm. Consider MacIntyre's description of the modern self:

. . . [T]he emotivist self can have no rational history in its transitions from one state of moral commitment to another. Inner conflicts are for it necessarily *au fond* the confrontation of one contingent arbitrariness by another. It is a self with no given continuities, save those of the body which is its bearer and of the memory which to the best of its ability gathers in its past. . . . The self thus conceived, utterly distinct on the one hand from its social embodiments and lacking on the

other any rational history of its own, may seem to have a certain abstract and ghostly character.²⁰

So we see displayed before us the consequences of the individualization and the fragmentation of human identity. One result is of particular interest. MacIntyre argues that emotivism as a moral theory goes hand in glove with a pervasive utilitarianism, a kind of utilitarianism which Kant saw as particularly pernicious, but which has nonetheless held the day. When all values and symbology are taken as human creations, anomalous in the universe and ultimately fiction — what Becker calls self-delusions — then there can be no *telos* transcending humanity-as-it-is. All purposes, after all, are merely further fictional enterprises. MacIntyre joins others in pointing out that pre-modern cultures provided a coherent story in which individuals were embedded psychically. One of the features of living within such mythic structures was that life was given meaning, one was part of the *cosmic* drama, whether playing a bit part or a leading role. Personal thoughts and actions, then, transcended individual lives. And that is the point: there was the possibility of transcendence, of giving a gift beyond.

But the transcendence available in traditional cultures was not merely the gift or sacrifice of the individual for the community of individuals. Transcendence was also a matter of ontological and epistemological levels. One of the results of the belief in a materialist cosmology is that ultimately all existents occupy one ontic level. In traditional cultures, on the other hand, reality was experienced as multi-leveled. Humans experienced themselves as multi-leveled, and their communities spanned at least from earth to heaven, so to speak. So transcendence was not a quantitative matter of one giving to many — not a transcendence provided by "patriotism" in a nationalistic context — it involved transformation, the realization of higher levels of being by the individual and/or the community. We shall return to this point shortly. We raise it now to note that, because of the modern unileveled ontology, ideals of transcendence expressed by Kant's dictum not to treat others as means but only as ends, fail to convince. When society is conceived atomistically, utilitarianism rules. Ends are gained by the atoms of society competing to accumulate whatever quantity is possible. There are no qualitative yardsticks to measure achievement, and the result is the quantification of transcendence.

This brings us back to Richard Rorty and his vision of what modern philosophy ought to be. The image with which he wants to replace philosophy as "mirror of nature" is philosophy as conversation. If human beings have no essence, then one description

of them is no more "essential" than any other — and certainly that of the "philosopher" cannot claim precedence. There is no "knowledge" more essential than any other, closer to the reality of what being human is about, or for:

If we see knowing not as having an essence, to be described by scientists or philosophers, but rather as a right, by current standards, to believe, then we are well on the way to seeing *conversation* as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood.²¹

In the end there is no knowledge, there is only talking, only conversation. As "knowledge consultant", the philosopher still has a function but only within that social, ever changing milieu. There are criteria, there are rules in the games — language that is chaotic communicates little. But the rules keep changing, the games keep changing — and they all change as the players change across time.

In this view, the chief error of positivism and scientism is the belief that there is or can be only one conversation that deals with what is "really there" to be talked about. Rorty says that there are many conversations that cannot be reduced to one. And each conversation is about the topics made up by agreement, implicit or explicit, of the conversants. There is no way to rank the conversations in terms of essentiality. What then should a philosopher do? Not search for eternal truths, for there are none, and anyway we could not agree ahead of time what one would look like if we met up with one; not even search for true sentences:

In a post-Philosophical culture, some other hope would drive us to read through the libraries, and to add new volumes to the ones we found. Presumably, it would be the hope of offering our descendents a way of describing the ways of describing we had come across — a description of the ways which the race had come up with so far.²²

So the philosopher is general historian of conversations and practitioner of "the hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period, or between our own discipline and another . . . [and] in the 'poetic' activity of thinking . . . new aims, new words, or new disciplines. . . ." ²³

The philosopher's role, then, is to monitor existing conversations, interpret among conversations, create new ones to "edify" the conversants. What the culture critic must avoid,

however, is the temptation to get caught up in conversations, to take a position and thereby to commit the post-Philosophical equivalent of Original Sin — to claim to have a view on anything:

. . . [E]difying philosophers have to decry the very notion of a view, while avoiding having a view about having views. This is an awkward, but not impossible position.²⁴

As much as this position of no position superficially resembles the mystic's void of emptiness (*śūnyatā, fanā*), it is better described as nihilism.

The various elements of the modern image recur: humanity's search for knowledge pictured as groups of conversations with no set topics or rules. The major limitation: talk can only be about talk since sentences can only refer to other sentences. All conversations are worthy to whatever participants they attract, with the good pragmatic proviso that they ought somehow help the conversants to cope — with what is not so clear. All conversations take place on the same floor, so to speak. There are none higher or lower — what counts is that they be interesting enough to keep going. And if not, we will find others more interesting as we move on in time.

Conversations are temporally bound, and the topics change. We get into difficulties, says Rorty, when we believe that all philosophical conversations are about the same topics — truth, beauty, reason, and so on. Not at all, for there are many conversations that cannot be represented in the terms of other on-going conversations. They are incommensurable. Yet we suggest, *pace* Rorty, that *the empty human*, the Protean human, searching for an identity that does not exist, is *the image of commensurability* among the characteristically modern conversations.

But this claim cannot be dealt with from within Rorty's perspective. The problem with relativism, according to perennialists, is that it relativizes its own position; it cannot "prove" itself. But that objection is empty unless made from another level. Hermeneuticism's fundamental assumption is that we cannot bootstrap ourselves out of the hermeneutical circle. What gives plausibility to such a position is its underlying anthropology which is unidimensional, on the one hand, and indeterminate, on the other. In this view, what distinguishes the human is behaviour; behaviour changes across time. There is nothing beneath what is apparent, the phenomenal. Or at least if there is we can't get to it, for we perceive through our interpretive lenses; those lenses, part of our behavioural repertoire, change across time. There is no Archimedean point; there is no human essence, no transcendental reference that

we haven't made up — and this is Becker's point — to cover the insecurity of our relativist position. There is no meaning in this vast universe that we don't put there. We are embedded in nothing, in vacuum. In psychoanalytic terms we are parentless is the cosmos.

In contrast, perennial philosophy offers a contemporary perspective that utterly denies the validity of hermeneuticism's relativism without denying the hermeneutical critique of positivism and of reductionist scientism.

Toward a Perennial Anthropology

The Perennial Anthropos

The first assertion about humanity made by perennialists is that there is a human nature, a human essence — a claim that is anathema to modern, post-traditional philosophies. Humanity is one in an essential way that has always been known by esoteric traditions and variously symbolized according to their specific patterns of expression. That there is a common recognition expressed through the millennia is by far more significant than the variety of its expressions. This is so because perennial philosophy shares with contemporary hermeneutics an awareness of the limitations of human articulation. So while it makes sense to ask, "What is humanity?" and to respond with sentences that begin, "Humanity is . . ." — it makes no sense at all to expect an entirely adequate response since perennial philosophy understands the limits of discursive reasoning which entail limitations on the adequacy of description:

. . . [T]o avoid the alteration of truth by a partial, restrictive, or systematized representation, one must keep in mind the part played by the inexpressible, which cannot be enclosed in any form, and which is, metaphysically speaking, the most important thing — we can say, the only essential thing.²⁵

We cannot capture ourselves, as the hermeneuticists appropriately assert, within our own linguistic nets. But the questioning itself, which expresses our attraction to transcend through understanding, points to what is essentially human. As Oscar Ichazo says: "Identity is what makes human beings human. . . . It is a question from the self to the self."²⁶

Perennial anthropology includes as essentially human the *eros* described by Plato, the urge or attraction to go beyond, to

become what we are not yet, and thus cannot describe. So the reduction of human identity to the apparent, to the observable — to say that human is what human does — is virtually the root sin of modernity:

Precisely because . . . the theomorphic nature and the terrestrial crust which covers and hides this spiritual core, are parts of human nature, man lives in this world and is yet bound to his own nature to transcend it. . . . [F]or man cannot remain man without seeking the Infinite and without wanting to transcend . . . the merely human. Hence to be satisfied with the merely human is to fall into the infra-human state.²⁷

If the urge to transcend moves us so fundamentally, then the normal state of being human is to be less than we could be.

Oscar Ichazo identifies three instincts without which we could not survive. We experience these instincts as "living questions", a constant subtle probing for the information crucial to survival. For the "conservation instinct" the constant question is "How am I"? When that internal question stops, our survival is endangered. The second, the relations instinct, takes the form of the internal question, "Who am I with"? If we cannot distinguish between those who can help us and who might hurt us, our survival is at issue. These two instincts we share with other animals. The third instinct, adaptation, is unique to humanity. The adaptation question is, "What am I doing here"? According to Ichazo this is an *instinctive* question. At so primary a level the questions of identity and purpose arise. Encompassing but surpassing an anthropology that analyzes human processes in relation to the goals of survival and homeostasis of the organism or species and is merely functionalist, the urge to transcendence represented by Ichazo as instinctually rooted reveals all such functionalisms to be reductionist:

The real question is, What am I here for? Survival is not our main obsession, but rather what we are doing with that life we have. Again, the interrogation is not only, who am I? but rather, What am I here for? . . . Since [man] must face himself, there must be a purpose for his life. Every true mystical tradition tells us that.²⁸

A Darwinian anthropology which has biological survival as its *telos* is not enough. Not that Darwin was wrong. There are survival needs, individual and corporate, which are engaged at the instinctual level. Also, for Darwin survival is defined at the species level. This encompasses Ichazo's "relations instinct". But we do not live

in isolation in "nature", we live in societies, always with others. The defining characteristic, the search for identity, is also so essential as to be instinctive: "What is he looking for? He is looking for what human beings are meant to be".²⁹ The question of identity, then, is in no sense epiphenomenal. Metaphysics is not a reflex of class location, nor sublimated libido, as Marx or Freud would have it. Nor is it a necessary screening of the dirty facts of life and death, as neo-Freudian Ernest Becker would have it. But rather metaphysical questions of identity are an expression of that instinctual level that is uniquely human, that urge to transcendence which is as elemental as physical and sexual hunger. At all levels the urge to unify our experience, e.g., through assigning "meaning" which unites part with whole, is an expression of that peculiarly human adaptation instinct.

Humanity as Multi-Levelled

If transcendence defines the human *telos*, then there is implied the possibility of transcendent dimensions of being.³⁰ Says Nasr, "One discovers . . . the repeated assertion that man has access to multiple levels of existence and consciousness within himself and a hierarchy of faculties and even 'substances' . . ." ³¹ Human nature is hierarchical and that hierarchy is ontological, a hierarchy of being identical with a hierarchy of knowing, of consciousness. So perennialists indicate both the multi-levelled nature of being, of what we experience, as well as the multi-levelled nature of how we experience. As multi-levelled beings embedded in a multi-levelled cosmos, we are *microcosmoi* constituted and structured identically with the rest of the cosmos. This contrasts with a post-traditional and materialist perspective, such as that of Ernest Becker, that sees humans as anomalous in the universe, freakishly endowed with self-awareness around which we can build only self-delusive myths of meaning.

Perennial anthropology joins contemporary critics of Cartesian mind/body dualism, but on the basis of radically different premises. Rorty, for instance, rejects such dualism by rejecting "mind" or "consciousness" as anything to be described as a distinct ontological level, asking us to eliminate the notion of "levels" altogether.³² Perennial philosophy rejects such dualisms on the very different ground that multiple levels of human manifestation

... cannot be reduced to the two entities of body and soul or mind and body, reflecting the dualism so prevalent in post-Cartesian Western thought. This dualism neglects

the essential unity of the human microcosm precisely because duality implies opposition. . . .³³

Positivists and hermeneuticists reject such dualism on the grounds that it posits one ontological category too many, while perennialists argue that mind-body dualism reflects an impoverished cosmology and anthropology.

Mystically based anthropologies typically elaborate more than two levels, although their taxonomies differ.³⁴ Common to the reality-maps upon which perennial anthropology draws are the distinctions of physical, emotional, and mental levels — all within the context of the spiritual level. Body, feelings, and mind are within our ordinary human experience, but meaningful distinctions are possible only from a perspective that transcends and thus orders them.

A Perennial Psychology of Normal Consciousness

The limitation of most of Western psychological research and post-traditional philosophical speculation to "ordinary language" and to "ordinary experience" is common no matter what other disagreements there may be within and between philosophy and psychology. Appeal to and cultivation of "non-ordinary" experiences, on the other hand, are common to most traditional worldviews and all esotericisms.³⁵ Attempts to limit "true" or "meaningful" conceptualization of human experience to the body level, the mind level, or the mind-body levels, i.e., to those levels affirmed by a scientistically-rooted consensus, generate preoccupations within modern philosophy and psychology with "anti-metaphysics". Those limitations are implicit in typically modern cosmological and anthropological images.

In this sense Rorty is accurate. "It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements", he proposes, "which determine most of our philosophical convictions".³⁶ Given belief in our modern pictures which capture only the ordinary, we are constrained to try to prove the extraordinary *from* and on the basis of the ordinary. "The ego as such", Schuon comments, "cannot logically seek the experience of what lies beyond egoity".³⁷ The result is obvious: we dismiss the "extraordinary" from the perspective of the reality-criteria of the consensus, and in the process we cannibalize from within the ontological differentiations (e.g., physical, emotional, mental) which manifest even within our ordinary experience. At the end we have great difficulty in articulating distinctions between mind, emotions, and body, between brain and

mind, between consciousness and behaviour. From this limiting perspective it is no wonder that the pragmatists desire to get out of the business of talking about such matters.

Only from a perspective that *transcends* the physical and mental realms does it make sense to talk about them with respect to ontology. In other words, we must already have accepted as established the reality of trans-normal experience if we are to make hierarchical distinctions between, say, the physical and the mental. How we establish the reality of transcendent realms is an important question with which perennialists deal by referring to "traditional wisdom", but also by suggesting that the questioner find a "path" which will enable him to experience them. At any rate it is clear that belief structures founded on experiences of the lower realms have no sufficient basis to deny or affirm the validity of claims to experiences of higher realms. Put in terms of the interest of post-traditional philosophy, to conceptualize about conceptualizing seems at first blush paradoxical — analogous to the old conundrum of the eye trying to see itself. Within intersubjectivity, we can only talk with each other about talking, with no way to achieve a standpoint external to conversation. In this view there can be only individual experience of intersubjectively conditioned realities.

A perennial anthropology cannot accept the ultimacy of personal and/or interpersonal subjectivity. In Hindu-Buddhist terms these levels correspond to *maya* or *samsara*. Schuon's argument on this point is ontological, akin to Anselm's argument for the necessary existence of God:

It is abundantly evident that man can perfectly well escape from subjectivity...; the proof of this lies in the fact that we are able to conceive both of the subjective as such and of passing beyond it. For a man who was totally enclosed in his own subjectivity, that subjectivity would not even be conceivable.³⁸

The very idea that there is thinking beyond subjectivity could not have resulted merely from ordinary subjective or inter-subjective experience. It had to have entered human awareness from a higher mental level which could be talked of as objective and inter-objective. Perennial anthropology, then, locates itself or speaks from the level of the transpersonal, a position hierarchically superior to the inter-subjective construction of persons.³⁹

Esoteric psychology and philosophy agree with post-traditional psychological and philosophical analyses of the determinative effects of physical and emotional states on mental functioning. As well,

there is agreement on the determinative symbolic-conceptual shaping that results from participating in a consensus. But such phenomena can be understood to be developmentally necessary while not ultimate. As we shall see, the "devolutionist" version of perennial philosophy, as represented by Guénon, Schuon, Nasr, and others, insists that paths to transcendence and transformation must be situated within traditional contexts. This is so because it is only within such communities that the socializing structures are conditioned by revealed religions.⁴⁰ So we see that stereotypes of perennial philosophy which suggest that perennialists claim a "generic" religion or a "generic" mystical path are ill-founded. Revelations which establish religions take a form appropriate to and/or seek to establish particular social conditions. Within a traditional culture, the pattern of the path of transcendence is related to the revealed requirements of the specific esoteric religion and its society.

There is an "evolutionist" version of perennial philosophy, too, which draws upon modern Western analyses of "samsaric" states to analyze the development of individual body-minds within societies which may or may not be traditional.⁴¹ Ichazo and Wilber share the view that the development of ego as described by non-traditional psychologies is an expression of the primordial myth of the Fall. In Ichazo's formulation:

We have to distinguish between man as he is in essence, and as he is in ego or personality. . . . Every human being starts in pure essence. Then something happens: the ego begins to develop; karma accumulates; there is a transition from objectivity to subjectivity; man falls from essence into personality. . . . Ego consciousness is the limited mode of awareness that develops as a result of the fall into society. Personality forms a defensive layer over the essence. . . .⁴²

Both versions of perennial philosophy agree that the quintessential human task, the "saving of one's soul", involves the transcendence of attachment to the social consensus of normal reality.

Only transcendence opens the way to the full realization of human possibilities. Although all perennialists agree that there is a variety of such possibilities and that there are and have been exemplars of self-realization, the two versions differ on the characterization of the possible ways. With respect to modernity as a base line from which to climb, the issue is illustrated by the story about a rural paragon of Coolidge-like prolixity who, upon

considering a tourist's plea for directions, replied, "You can't get there from here". The "evolutionists" argue that we can and must be able to get there from here, while the "devolutionists" declare that the road has been eradicated from the non-traditional cultural map. However, before we deal with the question of traditional and non-traditional "ways", let us briefly characterize just what "getting there" means.

The Upper Levels of the Perennial Anthropos: Soul

All esoteric teaching traditions agree that there are stages beyond discursive reason, beyond mind manifest-as-ego, although their descriptions and enumeration of the various levels do differ. Huston Smith refers to the "soul" and "spirit" levels, between which lies that "equator" that distinguishes individual awareness from what lies beyond individuality. The soul level is individual, but non-egoic, beyond socially-constructed personality:

The soul is the final locus of our individuality. Situated as it were behind the senses, it sees through the eyes without being seen, hears with the ears without itself being heard. Similarly it lies deeper than mind. If we equate mind with the stream of consciousness, the soul is the source of the stream; it is also its witness while never itself appearing within the stream as a datum to be observed.⁴³

Ichazo terms this level the "divine-human prototype" or "the pattern". It is what is archetypally human, that of which we can become aware by transcending ego-attached personality. Alternatively he refers to it as the "seedless state" which he claims can be attained only by means of clarifying all personal *karma* — eliminating the pressures stemming from the history of our egoism. This level represents the achievement of our full identity, our integration as human beings.⁴⁴

This level, the soul level, is the "interface" of the personal or individual with the archetypal form of humanity. Self-realization requires clarification of consciousness to the point at which there is self-recognition in that soul-space; it is a level of being and is itself transcendable.⁴⁵

In knowing that level, mind is transparent. Soul attends to mind, employs reason, and lies behind mental functioning. In a Pali text the Buddha is reported to say:

Now, if anyone should put the questions, whether I admit any view at all, he should be answered thus:

The Perfect One is free from any theory, for the Perfect One has understood what the body is, and how it arises and passes away. He has understood what the mental functions are, and how they arise, and pass away. He had understood what consciousness is, and how it arises and passes away. Therefore, I say, the Perfect One has won complete deliverance through the extinction, fading away, disappearance, rejection, and getting rid of all opinions and conjectures, of all inclination to the vainglory of 'I' and 'mine'.⁴⁶

For this text the penultimate level is understanding the mental formations, and the level from which there is such understanding is what perennialists call "soul". It is the highest level of "I" available to us and even attracts what is below to transcend toward it, although normally our self-sense attaches as ego to lower levels instead.

In the images of emanation and return in which perennial cosmology tends to be expressed, then, soul is the level which attracts what is below and is oriented toward what is above:

From the lowest level of reality, where even matter reaches out for form, to the highest heavens where angels gravitate around the Throne, a single breath and motion sweeps through existence, the search of each existent for the Good.

Our interest here is the way man, specifically his soul, instances this tendency.⁴⁷

Each level in the hierarchy of being enfolds and implicates the levels below it. Soul mediates spirit to what lies below, connecting and turning body and mind to spirit. Myths of the Fall in the various traditions are, according to this perennial perspective, expressions of the process of devolution from spirit to soul to matter.

All manifestations, of macrocosm and microcosm, are understood as energy/spirit enformed as different levels of "density". And since all existents are on a continuum of hierarchically ordered levels, no dualism — psychological or cosmological — is final. Thus a perennial anthropology acknowledges a hierarchy of levels within which the human being moves toward sustained awareness of internal unity, unity with all humans (since we are all identically constituted by the same laws), and unity with all creation or manifested being. But this very recognition of the unity of all creation opens us to the question of the origin of being — in *what* is our soul-level embedded? This leads us to consider what is beyond Being. For perennial philosophy, what takes us beyond soul to spirit is the continuum of Intellect, from which emerges our experiencing as soul and mind.

The Bridge: Reason and Intellect

It is through the soul level that we establish connection with what transcends, with levels that originate and comprehend individual existence. The positing of a level of individual consciousness above the "stream of consciousness" is an obvious point of difficulty for non-traditional psychologies. For modern philosophy the parallel obstacle is the claim that there are noetic levels above mind, and that there are criteria beyond reason. The distinction between mind and soul is related to that between reason and Intellect as utilized by Guénon, Schuon, and Nasr. Intellect, however, points us to transpersonal knowledge, beyond soul. Indeed, soul mediates Intellect to mind.⁴⁸

A distinguishing feature of perennial anthropology is its heavy emphasis on the human as *sapiens*. Schuon, in a recently translated new edition of *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*,⁴⁹ added an additional chapter — "To be Man is to Know". Nasr's Gifford Lectures were published as *Knowledge and the Sacred*. The perennial *anthropos* is multi-leveled; those levels are levels of being and of knowing. "Knowing" covers a complex set of functions that can be hierarchically differentiated. The hierarchy of knowing is dynamic and *telic*, powered by the *eros* for higher levels. Thus the higher-level function is origin, goal, and purpose of the lower. The psychical level, for example, is the source and goal of the mental. In relation to the function of thinking, Schuon says:

The sufficient reason for the existence of the human creature is the capacity to think; not just to think about anything, but to think about what matters, and finally, what alone matters.⁵⁰

This describes the human as creature, as individual. As Guénon points out, thinking *per se* is an individual, formal process.⁵¹

As we have seen, perennial anthropology is *telic*, focused always on transcendence. The key to transcendence is knowledge, or *gnosis*, so that the perennial anthropology is inevitably gnostic. It might seem that Rorty's critique of those Enlightenment ideals which make knowing through reason the agent for human perfection — with the modern consequence that epistemology, or knowing about knowing, becomes the new reigning Queen of the sciences — should apply also to perennial anthropology. However, perennial philosophy is in profound disagreement with virtually all Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment assumptions about the nature of knowing. A crucial difference is that knowledge, for perennial philosophy, is not *produced* by either hypothetico-deductive systems

or by induction; knowledge is revealed or recollected. Obviously there is knowledge of the material world, and the effectiveness of modern science in utilizing knowledge to manipulate matter is hardly to be ignored. But mind — which comprehends reason, imagination, and memory — functions as a particular, individualized, formalized manifestation of Intellect. In the vertical sense of causality characteristic of traditional metaphysics, Intellect "causes" mind. To attribute mental functioning to any collection or organization of physical properties — as is common in contemporary neuro-sciences and attendant philosophies — is regarded by perennialists as a category error which proceeds from an inadequate ontology. Moreover, this error has profound consequences for human existence: "The rational faculty detached from its supernatural context is necessarily opposed to man".⁵²

Many perennialists fault modernity for inflating and debasing reason. We shall see later that there is an important area of difference among perennialists in this evaluation of modernity in terms of its use of reason. But there is no disagreement that reason operating from an assumptive system that acknowledges only matter as ultimately real, with subjectivity considered epiphenomenal, works at cross purposes to humanity's proper goal. This judgement also applies to the typically modern perspective that acknowledges only mind (whether or not reduced to behaviour or to neural activity) as the locus of interpretation for defining our subjectivity, as if it constituted the totality of our possible experiencing. This limitation on "thinking" — which perennialists consider our distinctively human characteristic — to the world as channeled by our senses (and projections) originates in a dangerous apotheosis of a limited faculty. This modern orientation, when seen from a theological standpoint, is idolatry; from a logical one, it is ignorance of the principle of sufficient cause.

A characteristic of perceiving reality hierarchically is the recognition that causal analysis changes from level to level. Materialism, by contrast, interprets phenomena within a horizontal framework that is fundamentally uni-leveled. It understands reason as a product of the neural system or, functionally interpreted, as a substitute for the instincts of our non-human ancestors. Cause-as-material-cause or cause-as-function become the dominant modes within this paradigm.

But causality in an ontologically hierarchical cosmos is understood quite differently. Nasr sums up the perennialist critique of reductive understandings of cause:

... [L]imitations of modern science are to be seen . . . in its neglect of these higher states of being and its treatment of the physical world as if it were an independent order of reality. This neglect of the unmanifested and in fact nonphysical aspects of reality has not only impoverished the vision of cosmic reality in a world dominated by scientism, but it has caused confusion between vertical and horizontal causes and brought about incredible caricatures of the cosmic reality as a result of relegating to the physical domain forces and causes which belong to higher orders of existence.⁵³

One result of this confusion of horizontal and vertical is the assignment of causality to temporal priority, i.e., to the order of appearance. Hume's analysis of causality in terms of contiguity and succession accurately reflects the modern mind. Thus, as the paleo-sciences documented the record of appearance of phenomena in the physical world from physical remains, a developmental materialism was to be expected:

One of the consequences of this systematic neglect of higher orders of existence has been the denial of life as an animating principle of energy which has penetrated into the physical realm. Rather, life is seen as an accidental consequence of molecular motion according to that well-known reductionist point of view that does not realize that if life or consciousness "result" from certain activities of molecules and their combinations, they must either have already been present there in some way or come from elsewhere.⁵⁴

For a perennial anthropology, analysis of the reasoning function is crucial — as many meditators can attest from hours of silent self-observation. But any analysis of reasoning *per se* that takes it to be one behavioural system among others, or any attempt to found mind on the neurophysiology of the brain, are immediately subject to the criticism that they violate the principle of sufficient cause, deriving more from less, e.g., mental functioning from electrical impulses. And on the same principle, the cause of reason cannot be the body. Nonetheless, reason is an aspect of human embodiment and does serve physical survival needs. But reason depends upon what is hierarchically superior:

It has been said that man is a reasoning animal, which is true in the sense that reason is the distinctive mark

of man; but reason could not exist without the suprarational intelligence that is the Intellect, which it prolongs in the direction of sensorial phenomena.⁵⁵

In the causal language of perennial philosophy, Schuon asserts that "but for the absolute primacy of the Spirit, relative subjectivity would be neither possible nor conceivable; it would be like an effect without a cause".

On the scale of being, each level enlivens what it contains and is enlivened by that which contains it. Soul is the principle of mind's existence. Intellect is the principle of mind's knowing. Intellect is the spectrum of awareness, of knowing, which has the possibility of completeness as human manifestation:

... [T]he subjectivity of the animals is only partial, whereas that of man is total; the sense of the Absolute coincides with the totality of intelligence.⁵⁶

But such absolute knowing is not inevitable. For it occurs at a transpersonal level, beyond soul:

Intelligence is either individual or universal; it is either reason or Intellect; if it is individual, it must find its inspiration in its universal root to the extent that it seeks to go beyond the domain of material facts.⁵⁷

Cut off from that spiritual root, we are blocked from those levels of knowing that transcend mind, and thus we are prevented from self-realization. Noetically, that translates as a limitation on our possibilities to know immediately, intuitively:

The only true knowledge . . . is that which implies an identification of the subject with the object, or . . . an assimilation of the object by the subject. . . . [A]ll verifiable and effective knowledge is immediate, and . . . a mediate knowledge can be only a purely symbolic and representative knowledge.⁵⁸

Perennial epistemology, as we have seen, also recognizes the indirection of our ordinary knowing — as theory-laden, conditioned, and relative. This is discursive knowledge, processed linguistically and mentally — experience with sub-titles. But there is immediate, intuitive knowledge, which is what all introspective traditions cultivate. By self-observation, they claim, we can break the reactive link between experiencing and its associative mental concomitants. Much Zen practice, for example, is oriented toward such unconditioned, intuitive, experiencing which transcends mental habits.

That quality of knowledge, however, is a function of the level

of the knower and the consequent relationship to what is known. Intellect ranges from simple knowledge of the physical realm to a total absolute knowledge in which the distinction between knower and known is dissolved. Thus there can be intuitive knowledge of the relative, the formal, as well as the unmanifest and the Absolute. Above the manifest and formal, the knowledge is by identification or assimilation — you know it by being it. Below that "equator" of individuality, then, knowledge may be objective or subjective, intuitive or discursive, immediate or mediate. The relativity or contingency of the object of knowledge does not prevent immediate, intuitive knowing of it. As Intellect is the principle of all knowing, as metaphysical knowing is the prerequisite of all mediate, symbolic knowing, so too all that is in the universe is, in principle, intelligible.⁵⁹ Achieving such knowledge of the Absolute requires self-transcendence, the self-realization which, for the perennial anthropology, is the human *telos*.

As soul comprehends and enfolds mind, so spirit enfolds soul. It is the spirit level which is the realm identified as Absolute, and Intellect at that level is the possibility of assimilating what is beyond all individual, enformed experiencing. Not only can we experience trans-conceptually, which we do at the soul level, but we can experience transpersonally at the spirit level. At transpersonal levels, experiencing, being, and knowing are the same.

The transpersonal penetrates the personal at the soul level as Intellect, and it is in this sense that the perennialists claim that humans can "know" God. But at this stage our experience has transcended the personal. Were "I" to be expressed, the referent would not be a personal, historical, uniquely named individual:

The whole debate regarding the capacity or incapacity of the human mind to know God resolves itself thus: our intelligence can know God only 'by God', and therefore it is God who knows Himself in us. Reason can participate instrumentally and provisionally in this knowledge insofar as it remains united to God. It can participate in Revelation on the one hand, and Intellection on the other, the first relating to God 'above us' and the second to God 'within us'.⁶⁰

If humanity is understood as *pontifex* — the bridge "suspended between the Infinite and the finite",⁶¹ then intelligence is the span, with Intellect anchoring it on the side of the Infinite. The act of relating to "God above us" (or "God as Thou") is at the soul level, while experiencing "God within", transcending subject-object dichotomy, is at the level of spirit.

What Schuon designates as infinitude above, Huston Smith calls the ultimate stage of human being, the Spirit:

If soul is the element in man that relates to God, Spirit is the element that is identical with Him — not with his personal mode, for on the celestial plane God and the soul remain distinct, but with God's mode that is infinite. Spirit is the Atman that is Brahman, the aspect of man that is the Buddha-nature, the element in man which, exceeding the soul's full panoply, is that 'something in the soul that is uncreated and uncreatable' (Eckhart). It is the true man in Lin Chi the Ch'an master's assertion that 'beyond the mass of reddish flesh is the true man who has no title'; and the basis for the most famous of Sufi claims: Mansur al-Hallaj's assertion, 'ana'l-Haqq, I am the absolute Truth, or the True Reality'.⁶²

With this level we reach the most disputed and most characteristic claim of perennial anthropology, which is that all being is on a continuum with God's being and that there is an "uncreated element" of humanity. This translates experientially as the possibility of a *unio mystica*. As Smith says, "on this final stratum the subject-object dichotomy is transcended".⁶³ This also represents the final stage which completes the human being as microcosm.

The Ambivalence of Human Verticality

In his comparative phenomenology of religion, Mircea Eliade often comments on the universal myth of the Fall. Human fallenness and brokenness is an essential theme in a perennial anthropology. Just as the vertical dimension of humanity, stretching from the physical to the spiritual, exceeds that of other creatures, so too does the human capacity for distortion. It results when humans fail to realize their possibilities in the realms available to them:

. . . [I]f Intellection and Revelation are 'supernaturally natural' to man, their refusal is also a possibility of nature. . . ; but since man is integrally intelligent and thereby integrally free . . . he alone among terrestrial creatures is free to go against his own nature.⁶⁴

Essentially and originally, humanity is in perfect continuum with the spiritual realm; but historically, enformed in time and space, humanity is fallen. Therefore, according to Schuon, there is a need for authentic revelation in various modalities which suit particular historical needs. And so, too, there is a universal

resistance to revelation which, according to Schuon and the "devolutionist" version of perennial philosophy, finds its most extreme expression in modern man:

Now he possesses this liberty only in the wake of a fall which, precisely, separated him first of all from that immanent Revelation which is Intellection, and then sets him against prophetic Revelation which, for its part compensates for the absence of immanent Science; and which, by this compensation, awakens It, at least in principle.⁶⁵

This separation is experienced as conditioned subjectivity, as consciousness-attached. It occurs as separation from Intellect internally and from Revelation externally. In both aspects humans are cut off from that knowledge (and so, that being) which constitutes their purpose and salvation. The irony of the modern for a perennialist is that a culture so obsessed with the discovery and utilization of information, so flooded with information beyond what it can process, should yet be so far from redemptive gnosis. As Nasr points out, this is the characteristic disease of modernity, symbolized by our truncated human image. Moreover, this spiritual "amputation" is correlated with the origin of modern philosophy when philosophy ceased to provide its traditional function of directing humanity toward real knowledge:

Descartes has been rightly called the father of modern philosophy for it is he . . . who epitomizes what lies at the heart of modern philosophy and even modern science, namely the reduction of knowledge to the functioning of the individual reason cut off from the Intellect. . . . It was Descartes' individual, and therefore from the gnostic point of view 'illusory' self, which was placing its experience and consciousness of thinking as the foundation of all epistemology and ontology and the source of certitude. Even being was subordinated to it and considered the consequence of it, hence the *ergo*.⁶⁶

From the perspective of the "devolutionist" version of perennial philosophy, the Fall is an alienation from the knowledge available through Intellect. Within a traditional society founded on a revealed religion, that lack is compensated for by revelation. Within a non-traditional society cut off by its underlying anthropology and cosmology from the transpersonal and from truths communicated by a tradition, the situation seems hopeless. The modern result

is the apotheosis of ego, and a crisis in which human survival, and the survival of the planet, is in doubt.

The impairment suffered by "normal" humanity, as diagnosed by perennial philosophy, is an impairment in the capacity for immediate knowledge which has a soteriological function. "Realization", a perennialist synonym for salvation, is inseparable from knowing:

There is all the difference there between the universal unconditioned intellect and human understanding with its individual conditions, and also, from another aspect, all the difference which separates the standpoint of realization from that of a 'theory of knowledge'. The very word 'real' . . . takes on an altogether different metaphysical value when used to refer to this point of view of realization. To be more precise, it becomes an expression of the absolute permanence, in the Universal, of all that of which the being takes possession by the total realization of itself.⁶⁷

In the terms of this gnosis the key factor is the lack of connection of mind with Intellect. The experience of fallenness is that of a subjectivity cut off from anything above. An example of such a truncated human image has already been provided from Rorty's description of post-Philosophical humanity, and it bears repeating: "A post-Philosophical culture, then, would be one in which men and women felt themselves alone, merely finite, with no links to something Beyond".⁶⁸

Rorty captures precisely the ailment of alienation in subjectivity diagnosed by perennialists. Rorty offers no cure other than eliminating the notion of such a disease. Perennialists insist that healing is available. In fact, they claim that remedies have always been available — that traditional cultures have been catalyzed by and have coalesced around such remedies. Moderns call them religions. Traditionally, religions founded on revelations have served to bridge the gap between universality and individuality, between essence and personality. In perennialist terms, revelation is external Intellect, and Intellect is internal revelation. The implications which are drawn from this unity in function of Intellect and revelation generate the major distinction between those perennialists who are "devolutionists" and those who are "evolutionists". This division comes on the question whether there are access points to the desperately needed gnosis apart from the esotericisms lodged within the traditional religions.

Perennial Anthropology of Religion: Devolution and Evolution

A major task in elucidating a perennial philosophy and anthropology for the modern reader is to highlight the relationship between traditional and post-traditional humanity. All perennialists agree that even given the great variety in traditional cultures, they share far more with each other than they do with modernity. Modern consciousness breaks radically with all prior human consciousness. However, a key to differences among perennialists is their evaluation of modernity. That evaluation is inseparable from their perspectives on the place of traditional religions in relation to a secularized culture, and the potential function of traditions for the modern seeker. It is here that the distinction between "devolutionists" and "evolutionists" begins to become clear.

All perennialists understand the Fall as symbolic of a characteristic of individual consciousness. As individuals we are caught in *maya*, apparently as an inevitable result of our being incarnate and socialized. Ichazo (an evolutionist) talks about the "fall" from essence into personality. Schuon (devolutionist) describes "fallen man and thus the average man" as being "poisoned by the passional element" which results in "an obscuring of the Intellect and the necessity of a Revelation coming from the outside".⁶⁹ The major difference between the two expositors of perennial philosophy lies in their perspectives on the course of corporate human history. Devolutionists seem to preserve the belief in a golden age far in the past, one in which humans were not dominated by their own "passional elements". At the near end of history is modernity, which in their view is so dominated by attachments to the passions and to the physical level that its people are virtually beyond help. Evolutionists believe that human transformation is possible even within the context of modernity.

Ontology and History: The Devolutionist Position

Behind the discussion of levels of being and knowing lies an image that Lovejoy calls "the great chain of being", and that Guénon analyzes in *The Multiple States of Being*. This hierarchical perspective does not interpret the structure of being as a developmental process across time. Perennialists reject precisely this kind of developmental viewpoint, entailed in Darwinism and its kindred theories. Instead, the reality of levels is for them

simultaneous or structural rather than temporal. Levels are potentials for manifestation, what Ichazo calls "material manifestation points". The possibilities for manifestation, Guénon and Ichazo would agree, are "eternal" — inherent structures of being. Ichazo speaks of the "laws of manifestation", which constitute the manifestation points, as "pre-established". Their status for perennialists seems to be similar to that of archetypes or Platonic ideas.

The aspects of the totality of creation which find expression in space-time, therefore, must be described in terms of descent rather than ascent. No being can be caused or causally explained from below:

. . . [T]he origin of a creature is not a material substance, it is a perfect and non-material archetype: perfect and consequently having its origin in the Spirit, and not in matter.⁷⁰

Indeed, matter or the physical itself has its origin in what is ontologically superior: ". . . [M]atter is the final point of the descent of the objective pole, sensorial consciousness being the corresponding subjective phenomenon".⁷¹

The notion of birth as the hierarchically lowest point in a process of ontological descent is expressed in Jewish and Christian myths about souls in heaven sent down into bodies, as well as in analogous stories about reincarnation in Greek and Indic traditions. Eliade points to the pervasiveness of myths of a Golden Age as characteristic of traditional cultures.⁷² In these myths, humanity as a whole makes the descent, as evidenced in the widespread theme of lost, Edenic societies. The connection between the "perfect and non-material archetype" and its earthly manifestation, then, is made within the process of human history as well as within the manifestation of the individual. This movement of spirit into matter is described as

. . . a trajectory; this starts not from an inert and unconscious substance, but proceeds from the Spirit — the matrix of all possibilities — to the earthly result, the creature; a result which sprang forth from the invisible at a cyclic moment when the physical world was still far less separate from the psychic world than in later and progressively 'hardened' periods.⁷³

Just as the individual devolves through the levels, so does all of humanity across the vast period of human existence. The result, according to the devolutionists, is that as the re-connection with

(or re-collection of) the Spiritual origin becomes more and more difficult, an "exterior Revelation" becomes more and more crucial.

Schuon, in associating the need for Revelation with the obscuring of the original Intellect, refers to three stages of relationship between Intellect and Revelation:

There are here three possibilities: firstly, men dominate the passional element, everyone lives spiritually by his inward Revelation; this is the golden age, in which everyone is born an initiate. Second possibility: men are affected by the passional element to the point of forgetting certain aspects of the truth, whence the necessity — or the opportuneness — of Revelations that while being outward are metaphysical in spirit, such as the Upanishads. Thirdly: the majority of men are dominated by passions, whence the formalistic, exclusive and combative religions. . . .⁷⁴

And, the devolutionists add, there is a fourth possibility, which is the one most characteristic of modernity. In the modern age (which is an instance of *kali yuga*), even "formalistic, exclusive and combative" religions are denied by what Guénon calls "the reign of quantity" — and the connection with the Spiritual seems entirely lost.

For the perennialist who is devolutionary in orientation, human history as a whole is a recapitulation of the ontological process of the descent of Spirit into matter. The current age is judged to be at an end-point opposite the Edenic stage. Moderns are born into a socially constructed world which makes spiritual realities inaccessible to them and makes transcendence incomprehensible to them — cutting them off from Revelation and Intellect.

Nasr distinguishes between "Pontifical" and "Promethean" images of man. His way of applying these images is representative of the devolutionary orientation which finds the image which is typical of modernity to be thoroughly Promethean:

Promethean man . . . is a creature of this world. He feels at home on earth, earth not considered as the virgin nature which is itself an echo of paradise, but as the artificial world created by Promethean man himself in order to make it possible for him to forget God and his own inner reality. Such a man envisages life as a big marketplace in which he is free to roam around and choose objects at will. Having lost the sense of the sacred, he is drowned in transience and impermanence and becomes a slave of his own lower

nature, surrender to which he considers freedom. He follows passively the downward flow of the cycle of human history in which he takes pride by claiming that in doing so he has created his own destiny.⁷⁵

Under such circumstances the only remedy to which one could turn would be the traditional religions as bearers of revelations. By apprenticing oneself to the *exoteric* forms of one of the authentic traditions, eventually it might become possible to enter the *esoteric* mode preserved within the religion's outer forms.

Schunon notes the paradox involved in presenting traditional wisdom as a "perennial philosophy" which is available to any reader who happens upon it in this predominately Promethean world:

We live in an age of confusion and thirst in which the advantages of communication are greater than those of secrecy; moreover, only those esoteric theses can satisfy the imperious logical needs created by the philosophic and scientific positions of the modern world.⁷⁶

Perennial philosophy, especially in this situation, constitutes an invitation to secular humanity to reconsider their traditional religious roots.

Yet the invitation is offered with little hope that many will respond, or that those who do so will be very discerning in their response. The distinctively modern temper is at best non-religious and more characteristically anti-religious. Therefore, Schunon acknowledges that "it has become increasingly difficult to accept . . . not merely that a particular religion is the only true one, but also that there is such a thing as a true religion".⁷⁷ And we must note that where the criteria of truth are imposed by the positivists, the only party which will fight for recognition on those terms are the fundamentalists; where there are criteria-less conversations in the congenial atmosphere of Rorty's hermeneutics, there all dogmatic claims will become historicized and relativized — and 'truth' will denote whatever seems attractive within the intersubjectivity of the participants.

Against this background of narrowed or lost criteria, devolutionists claim that two main functions are served by their perennialist perspective. First, perennialism, as a philosophy, can effectively oppose modern ideologies. Second, the esoterism at its core can provide a critical function to guide whatever efforts moderns may make to appropriate traditional exotericisms. From a perennialist standpoint, each tradition is limited in the sense that revelations and the human responses to them in particular historical circumstances tend to generate limitations in terms of cosmology, eschatology, and exclusivism:

Religious theses are certainly not errors, but they are cut to the measure of some mental and moral opportuneness; men come in the end to see through the adaptation as such, but meantime the truth, for them, is lost.⁷⁸

If nothing more, perennial philosophy can provide — even in this *kali-yuga* — a critical standard over and against modern philosophies and particular traditions:

Only esoterism can explain the particular 'cut' or adaptation and restore the lost truth by referring to the total truth; this alone can provide answers that are neither fragmentary nor compromised in advance by a denominational bias. Just as rationalism can remove faith, so esoterism can restore it.⁷⁹

But this remedy is of limited value since only the rare individual is attracted to it. Schuon, for example, addresses his writings "only to those who want to read and understand them".⁸⁰ The process of human history as a whole has been one of increasing alienation. Cut off from Intellect and Revelation, the profoundly human inclination toward redemption tends to get short-circuited by the modern assumption that assertions about its possibility are "metaphysical" in the sense of "fictional". So the modern person is put in a position in which religion no longer can perform its "higher" function of providing access to an esoteric core, and humanity is left to pursue its self-devised and ultimately destructive Promethean schemes. The Fall becomes the most apt image of the corporate and the individual career, while the notion of the Return or Ascent remains as little more than a dim memory or depends on the enterprise of the extraordinary *individual*. Any *movement* which has its roots in modernity must be disqualified by the devolutionists from having redemptive value.

The Evolutionist Critique

But on what does this disqualification rest? Not on an ontological judgment which perceives each human existence as the result of a devolving process, but on an historical judgment committed to a theory of the descent of human civilizations. It is this judgment that Ken Wilber calls into question. And indeed the credibility of perennial philosophy as such may be called into question — admittedly "from below" — if commitment to a devolutionist history is required.

Wilber distinguishes between a "theological fall" — what

we have described as "ontological" — and a "scientific fall". The theological fall is human existence in *maya*, in ignorance of its full potential, its origin. The scientific evidence, according to Wilber, is that this is and thus far has always been the normal state of embodied, socialized human awareness. The scientific fall, however, introduces into consciousness the awareness that this is the case — and so requires humans to take into account that separation. Wilber interprets the human process, from primitive to modern, as an evolution of awareness which has been painful:

And around the second millennium B.C., after some dozen billions of years of struggles and substitutes, evolution produced the first fully self-conscious beings, who, for just that reason, awoke to their vulnerability, separation, alienation, and mortality. They did not create all that; they just become aware of all that. That was the *scientific fall* . . . the final emergence from Eden.⁸¹

Wilber argues that there simply is no evidence for an historical "golden age", but that the stories about it reflect an ontological rather than an historical truth. To conflate the theological with an historical claim, however, results in a confused position which does not seem tenable in light of the data of history. In consequence of this confusion, the ontological and anthropological truth in Edenic myth is lost — to some extent by those who affirm its historicity and entirely by those who deny it. But in both responses the essential truth is displaced and subjected to misunderstanding. And it is here that Wilber makes a point which Ichazo, too, emphasizes: perennial philosophy is not inherently in contradiction with modern science:

. . . [I]f we back up *prior* to history . . . and time — prior to the Big Bang, so to speak — the theologians are right: mankind [and all things] did fall from real Heaven [with original sin] . . . which is re-created *now*, moment to moment, as a psychological state of ignorance — what the Hindus and Buddhists call *avidya*. . . At *the same time*, the scientists are also right — man came up [but not from] the apes. Those are perfectly compatible views, and both are correct.⁸²

So we are brought precisely to the question whether or not the conditions for a path (or paths) to transcendence can be met within a cultural setting whose major mental features are ruled by a scientific materialism and whose currently prevailing critic is a hermeneutical relativism. Can there be authentic mysticism

apart from the historically established traditions? Must perennial philosophy be explicitly "traditional" in that sense? Can one find access to an effective path apart from already established exoterisms? And, if not, is perennial philosophy truly "perennial"?

Toward a Perennial Hermeneutic

Perennialists, whether devolutionist or evolutionist, agree that there is no necessary contradiction between reason and revelation. On the contrary, for Schuon, Nasr et al., Revelation and Intellect are functionally equivalent. But a narrowed yet technically competent reason, when cut off from the upper hierarchical levels, produces a scientism which all perennialists — and some moderns — reject. A perennial philosophy, however, must proceed from reason in connection with Intellect — i.e., it must be "caused" transcendently in order for its purpose to be consonant with the higher purpose of all human existence and in order for it to live up to its name.

Perennial philosophy provides a resource for critical judgment, and perennial anthropology provides a model for human development. They have the potential to make a distinctive contribution to issues relating to establishment of criteria in contemporary hermeneutical discussion. In relation to religion, they offer standards for a perennial critique of traditions. Perennialists stand together on these matters. Schuon, for example, takes it as axiomatic "that integral spirituality comprises by definition a doctrine and a method. . . ."83

Both Ichazo and Wilber have taken steps toward the formulation of principles for a "perennial hermeneutics". Ichazo takes this as his main task in *Between Metaphysics and Protoanalysis*, and Wilber does the same in his *A Sociable God: A Brief Introduction to a Transcendental Sociology*.84 Throughout nearly all of his published work, Wilber has been formulating, refining, and elaborating his characterization of the hierarchy of levels of consciousness, in which he seeks to harmonize traditional and modern models of being and awareness. And, on the basis of this "map" of consciousness, he evaluates specific and typical socio-religious phenomena. Ichazo, too, works with a hierarchical map of consciousness, as yet unpublished; but he gives most of his attention to the task of analyzing alternative types of logic, which he sets out on an onto-historical scale. He and Wilber alike propose that if we take as our measure the levels of consciousness known and available within a given cultural nexus, then humanity should be regarded as having evolved across time toward Return, or Ascent, by "involution".

Ichazo regards the emergence of a new logic as a crucial step in the redemption of humanity in general, and he considers it the key to the more specific methodological task of formulating a "scientific mysticism". Like other perennialists, he begins with the assumption that perennial philosophy has at its centre a hierarchical and sapiential orientation, and that one's level of knowing must match one's level of being:

We believe that there are ideas a person must understand in order to be whole. Not only must we change the way we think but we must change what we think.⁸⁵

He proposes that with an adequate logic the territory of the mind can be mapped and that he has done so with "scientific" accuracy. He claims to understand the various levels and typical modes of human manifestation, and to be able to pass them to others by means of a comprehensive set of individual and group exercises which presuppose and apply the complete map of consciousness which opens the way to realization:

. . . [W]e want to achieve that state of totality not by denying the intellect but by using the intellect as an instrument to achieve that situation. . . . That means, again, that we must know all the parameters of the mind, how it works, and how to use it to our benefit rather than in our disturbance.⁸⁶

Ichazo affirms that the map and the logic which he proposes, and by means of which the theory and practice of a "scientific mysticism" is elaborated, can be utilized to disclose the principles of all manifestation. He terms the logic which is appropriate to this task "trialectics", and its proper use is for

. . . the discovery of unity by way of . . . logical reasoning. . . . Why is this so important? Because proving the unity of God with trialectical logic means that it is possible to understand all that is inside the universe.⁸⁷

The assumption that defines Ichazo's approach as evolutionist is that his method will allow one to "climb the ladder of Intellect" without adherence by belief or practice to a traditional religion. Revelation, established in and through one of the authentic traditions, is not a precondition to realization. Rather, he characterizes the modes of thought which he claims are associated with the dogmatic components of traditional religions as pre-logical. And he regards trialectics, as a type of logic, to be the only one which is wholly adequate to the fulfilment of human mental functioning in the

service of unitive mysticism. By contrast, dependence on dogma is pre-logical, systematic articulation of theology tends to utilize a pattern of formal logic such as that of Aristotle, and the effort to make logic applicable under the conditions of time and change has resulted in formulations such as the dialectics of Hegel. Only trialectics, according to Ichazo, is effective in the service of comprehending the laws of manifestation of knowing and of being.

However, Ichazo is not simply proposing that proper reasoning is equivalent to enlightenment. His point is that

It is natural in the history of humanity that every time and every epoch has to have its own ways of realization. Now, that is what our technological society needs to work on more. [Our theory] is trying in that sense to fit with our time and with the natural process of evolution of human history, to match the problems that evolving society presents.⁸⁸

He is proposing an alternative to the position represented by Schuon that participation in an exoteric form of traditional religion is the prerequisite to entering an effective path toward realization.

The standard of evaluation for a path, according to any formulation of perennial philosophy, is its effectiveness in enabling transformation. If one form or another has ceased to attract due to changes in the conditions of human existence, then why not suppose that another is emerging now to serve its function — and yet another may emerge in the future? After all, a variety of effective forms did appear in the past to match specific human conditions. As perennial philosophy claims, the Buddha gave expression to revelation in a manner suited to one place and time, Moses to another, Jesus another again — each manifesting within particular space-time conditions. And from this, Wilber's point is that there is a perennial anthropology which makes it possible to develop a scale of evaluation, and that all religious phenomena are open to critical assessment by it. Primordially or antiquity, simply as such, are no guarantee of authenticity and effectiveness. Nor does recent emergence automatically disqualify the claims for a path. If temporal location is taken as a decisive consideration, perennial philosophy's adherence to eternal values is undercut.

Ichazo and Wilber share a common perspective on the current place of religion and reason in relation to the goal of self-realization. Ichazo asserts the redemptive value of Intellect, apart from prior revelations. He regards the latter to be valid and authentic, but timebound in expression. He acknowledges that even in this age revelation is possible, but he claims that it does not depend upon faith for its effectiveness:

We have the three things that really make a reality. We have a school, we have a true teaching, scientifically speaking, and we have a true message that only comes by way of divine revelation.⁸⁹

Ichazo's positive emphasis is on the effectiveness of reason and revelation for realization, and his critique is of the current ineffectiveness of faith which lacks the support of an adequate logical mode.⁹⁰ Hence — as moderns and most perennialists agree — the conditions required for religious exotericisms to function tend to be lacking in modernizing cultures.

Wilber, too, concludes that the exoteric forms have lost their utility in a world in which the capacity for belief in dogma has been exhausted. He shares the thesis that ordinary, socialized human consciousness has evolved over millennia and continues to evolve; and he seeks to illustrate, if not demonstrate, it in *Up from Eden*. His schema of the evolution of human consciousness, like Ichazo's, moves from mythic-religion, to metaphysics (still captured within a mythic-religious framework), to rational science (in rebellion against metaphysics because of its mythic-religious context), to a metaphysics released from belief in myth — or from what Ichazo terms "pre-logical thinking".

Both of them agree that individuals achieved transcendence within prior mythic or pre-logical cultures, and both affirm that the general level of human awareness is manifesting on an ascending scale across time. Wilber outlines this as a two-tiered developmental schema. As humanity evolves its basal level of consciousness in the exoteric tier (say, from magical to mythical to rational), increasingly higher modes of consciousness become available in the corresponding esoteric tier:

. . . [T]he new egoic structures, as a true evolution of consciousness, brought new and expanded *potentials*. It brought a new level of exchange, that of mutual self-recognition and esteem. It brought a higher mentality; the possibility of rational comprehension; self-reflexiveness; a grasp of historical time; a final transcendence of nature and the body; a new form of, and potential respect for, morality; legally recognized self-consciousness; and the beginning of the sanctity of personhood. These might not have been universally implemented and respected, but the *potential* for such exchanges was clearly present.⁹¹

Make no mistake — this is a pattern of progress, as measured from

a perennial perspective. These potentials become available as their lawful preconditions are met.

But (recall the "ambivalence of verticality" section above) Wilber notes that each step in development in the basal level of consciousness opens humanity to the possibility of increased suffering, too:

The new egoic structure also brought *necessarily*, new terrors. The self-conscious ego was more vulnerable, more aware of its mortality; more guilty in its emergence; more open to anxiety. *And* the new terrors *inherent* in the ego, when coupled with the new *powers* of the ego, resulted in the *possibility* (not necessity) of even more brutal terrors exercised by the ego: new substitute sacrifices, mass homicides, oppressive exploitation, massive slavery, class alienation, violent inequality, hedonistic overindulgence, and wildly exaggerated substitute gratifications. . . .⁹²

The evolutionist Wilber could match any of the devolutionists in characterizing the negative features of modernity, but he reads them as the price of significant advance rather than as evidence of radical decline.

Wilber's treatment of the ambivalence of growth and development is indebted to the work of Ernest Becker. In the last three books which he wrote near the end of his life, and which are contributions to a psychoanalytic critique of culture, Becker relentlessly places his emphasis on the ways in which human beings symbolize and project fears. They are revealed in our attachments — to each other, to our society, to our social roles, and to our possessions — and in how we use these attachments to focus and deflect the desire for what we simply cannot obtain — release from the fear of being alone in a universe of matter and space, a world where death wipes out all achievements. He also highlights the terror involved in becoming aware (e.g., via de-mythologizing teachers, psychologists, philosophers) of these games of avoidance.

Wilber adapts Becker's general conclusion to his own purposes. By leaving innocence and ignorance, we may certainly move closer to realization; but we are also opened to a sense of vulnerability that is analogous to what we might experience in leaving the security of parental protection (or of any dependency relationship). Along with greater power comes greater insecurity, greater responsibility *and* more terrifying potential consequences. But, for Wilber and other perennialists of an evolutionist orientation, what Becker took to be the final truth about the tragic human condition is taken to be the truth about a transitional stage in human development.

Both Wilber and Ichazo acknowledge the immense, perhaps insurmountable, dangers, generated by the typically modern hypertrophy of reason, dissociated from the spiritual realm. They also view the growth of materialism — paradoxically — as a metaphysical principle. As evolutionary perennialists who are working from an anthropology that acknowledges a full range of levels, they can survey and critically evaluate the modern human image as a case of stunted development which results in an anthropology which cannot rise above the mental level. But they also acknowledge remarkable modern developments at the mental level, including powerful methods of mapping that realm and those below it.

That is to say that a perennial position, hierarchically oriented, if it is truly critical and objective, cannot but apply its standards impartially. When it does so, it accords no special standing to either the nostalgic yearning for Eden (which Eliade associates with the archaic-mythical mind-set) or the anxious pursuit of novelty (which Becker associates with the modern flight from death).

The Uses of a Perennial Hermeneutic

We need to realize the possibility of a perennial hermeneutic that can truly engage the situation in which we find ourselves. Perennial philosophy has something to learn from contemporary hermeneutics in that regard. Joseph Bleicher, in a clarifying account of the state of the current hermeneutical arts, sounds a warning that perennialists must take to heart. He says that "the object of hermeneutics (i.e., interpretation) can be rejected *in toto* only at a price; the blindness towards the moment of transcendence inherent in cultural manifestations".⁹³ Hermeneutics has opened us to the variety of conversations in which humanity participates, to the variety of traditions. The struggle within contemporary hermeneutics has to do with what Rorty calls "the incommensurability" of the conversations, the absence of a neutral perspective from which to evaluate the claims and descriptions of the conversants. The mental conditioning inherent in the use of language in all conversations immediately precludes absolute claims to any uniquely true expressions.

Although a perennial perspective transcends the finality of the traps of socialized minds, there is still much to learn at the level of cultural particularity and plurality. Part of the current crisis in religion at participant and student levels has to do with the immediate availability of the variety of traditions. The appropriate criticism of exoteric-orthodox historical and

epistemological claims by positivistically-inclined critics has been replaced by hermeneutical approaches seeking to escape a nihilistic relativism so easily generated by the bare fact of the plurality of traditions. The absence of a critical principle (not external to but superior to the traditions themselves, as well as to the critical contemporary "traditions" confronting them) has led to an impasse in understanding. Perennial philosophy can offer the needed appreciation of both the ontological Absolute underlying and, indeed, causing those various traditions and modernisms devoted to the ideal of transcendence, and a necessary tentativeness about the finality of any particular expression of that Absolute.

A perennial hermeneutic offers the possibility, then, of a standard of commensurability within the realm of Being, while recognizing its limitations within the hierarchically superior realm of Non-being, or Plenum. It is in this spirit that we look toward further explorations of Wilber's hermeneutics (now sketchily set out in *A Sociable God*) as well as of Ichazo's hierarchy of logics (presented in a cryptic way in *Between Metaphysics and Protoanalysis*). Both of these programs suggest that the current state of modern thinking need not occasion total despair. Modern gains in our understanding of our physical existence are undeniable. Moreover, modern techniques for the analysis of intra-psychic processes seem to be fast approaching the sophistication of, say, traditional Buddhist psychology. All traditions have had to deal in one way or another with the analysis of subjectivity. A scientific approach to subjectivity, which is a major strength of Western psychological research, is the beginning of an appropriate path for humans who have been socialized in scientifically-oriented cultures. A metaphysics based on the laws of manifestation in all realms is the only kind which can be adequate to the current conditions — and crises — of modern existence.

Owen Barfield, a long-time interpreter of the thought of Rudolf Steiner, in a recent review of a new edition of Steiner's major works makes the following observation:

That stage in the evolution of consciousness which gave rise to, and has been urged forward by, the scientific revolution in the West is, on the one hand, responsible for the prevailing materialism of the present age. On the other hand it is that which has made possible exact knowledge both of nature and of spirit. Up to now this has only been realized in relation to the knowledge of nature, and there only in a very limited (predominantly mineral) sphere. Correlatively, however, it has made

possible exact knowledge of man's own spirit and of the spiritual world of which he is a part.⁹⁴

It is this sort of inquiry that Ichazo calls "scientific mysticism". The recognition of the lawfulness of physical manifestation has been followed by the articulation of the laws themselves, a process manifesting right now. And the same is occurring with the recognition of the lawfulness of manifestation of emotional and mental processes. Scientific mysticism, then, is by no means a paradox. Rather, it is the current awareness of the creation by Logos. All manifestation is lawful. That is the burden of the rabbinic midrash on the first chapter of Genesis which declares that God, in creating the universe, looked into the Torah for directions.

In the acceptance of science as a tool for human transformation, we must also acknowledge the key to its utility: the reconciliation of the reason of science with Intellect. But we must also inquire with openness into current claims to manifestation of Intellect, even Revelation, which are apart from already manifest exoterisms. For this we need, we repeat, a perennial hermeneutic. If we accept the distinction of esoterism from exoterism, we must look to apparently secular forms of human existence for current exoterism. We cannot afford to prejudge the situation by dismissing out of hand current yearnings and techniques for transcendence. Nor can we forget that humanity is in a crisis which may be final. In truth we see this, and in our seeing we begin to be realigned with the sacrality of Mother Earth. As we slip into the terror of self-destruction, we see that we are joined together in ways unknown until this moment. Perennialism and hermeneutics build on this awareness of the dependence of individual consciousness on the larger community of consciousness. This is integral to their shared critique of the major modern sin — the obsession with ego, the apotheosis of the individual. Yet the awareness of our unity in a wider circle of humanity is simultaneously an awareness of the variety of religious traditions, which makes it impossible for us to validate any orthodox claim to exclusive possession of total truth.

While a perennial hermeneutic must beware of nostalgia for traditions which are no longer accessible to a rapidly changing humanity, it must also heed the basic lesson from historical analysis that traditions continue to change the forms of expression of their esoteric core. Granted that every authentic cumulative tradition proceeds from an eternal archetype — which causes its space-time realization — the possibilities for realization of the archetype shift across the ages which we reckon in our historicizing. And

in every age a perennial hermeneutic will be open in principle toward mutual enrichment of the several traditions by one another, and toward non-exclusivist formulations within each of them. In modernity the need for such openness is particularly acute, and the main alternatives to it are unreasoning skepticism and unreasoning fundamentalism.⁹⁵

NOTES

1. *Between Metaphysics and Protoanalysis: A Theory for Analyzing the Human Psyche*, New York, Arica Institute Press, 1982, p.23.
2. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, p.22.
3. As is suggested by the work of Mary Douglas. See, for example, *Essays in the Sociology of Perception*, Mary Douglas (ed.), London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982.
4. Princeton, University Press, 1979.
5. *Ibid.*, p.12.
6. *The Hermeneutical Imagination: Outline of a Positive Critique of Scientism and Sociology*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982, p.14.
7. Keith Campbell, Materialism, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards (ed.), New York, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., and the Free Press, 1967, v.5, p.179.
8. Rorty, *op.cit.*, p.387.
9. *Ibid.*, p.123.
10. Cited in Ken Wilber, *Quantum Questions: Mystical Writings of the World's Great Physicists*, Boulder, Shambhala, 1984, p.171.
11. Rorty, *op.cit.*, p.372.
12. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays 1972-1980)*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982, p.20.
13. Cited by Rorty, *ibid.*, p.xxxix.
14. *Ibid.*, p.42.
15. *Ibid.*
16. New York, The Free Press, 1975.
17. *Ibid.*, p.283f.
18. *Ibid.*, p.284f.
19. MacIntyre, *op.cit.*, p.23.
20. *Ibid.*, p.31.
21. Rorty, *Mirror*, p.389.

22. Rorty, *Consequences*, p.xl.
23. Rorty, *Mirror*, p.362.
24. *Ibid.*, p.371.
25. René Guénon, *The Multiple States of Being*, Joscelyn Godwin (trans.), Burdett, New York, Larson Publications, 1984, p.21.
26. *Between Metaphysics and Protoanalysis*, p.90.
27. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, London, George Allen and Unwin, p.27. Also see below, note 30.
28. *Between Metaphysics and Protoanalysis*, p.47f.
29. *Ibid.*, p.49.
30. It is possible to conceive of an eros for transcendence unmatched by an anthropology which allows for it. Becker recognizes the universality of such a spiritual drive in a humanity which, in his view, is and can only be merely mortal matter. This results in a creature caught painfully in utter self-contradiction, and this is the thesis of *The Denial of Death*. Becker never defends his materialistic assumptive framework, but writes from it.
31. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred: The Gifford Lectures, 1981*, New York, Crossroad, 1981, p.171.
32. Rorty, *Mirror*, chs 2 and 3.
33. Nasr, *Knowledge*, p.171.
34. Ken Wilber has put together some very useful charts which compare, in synoptic format, maps of consciousness distilled by generations of meditators and from some Western psychologists who have been convinced by their own research that consciousness develops hierarchically by levels. See *The Atman Project: A Transpersonal View of Human Development*, Wheaton, IL, The Theosophical Publishing House, 1980, pp.177-184.
35. Recently, however, physicists such as Fritjof Capra and David Bohm have begun to look to traditional cosmologies based on mystical experience as vehicles for integrating the apparent paradoxes of post-Newtonian physical theory. Apart from traditionally-based psychologies, appreciation of non-ordinary levels which are trans-normal rather than abnormal or subnormal (say, autistic or psychotic) is developing in some versions of Humanistic psychology and is a defining feature of Transpersonal psychology. See David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, esp. ch 7; Roger N. Walsh and Frances Vaughan (eds.), *Beyond Ego: Transpersonal Dimensions in Psychology*, Los Angeles, J.P. Tarcher, 1980, pp.15-24.

36. Rorty, *Mirror*, p.12.
37. *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, Pates Manor, Bedford, Middlesex, Perennial Books, 1981, p.32.
38. *Logic and Transcendence*, New York, Harper and Row, 1975, p.7.
39. Traditional and modern perspectives on the social (especially linguistic) construction of persons or egos are, indeed, quite similar in their observations. For the paradigmatic modern statement, see Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1972. For a traditional account, the Buddhist psychologists are most perceptive, particularly in their analysis of the differences between experiencing an object with and without accompanying symbolization and conceptualization.
40. See Schuon, *Esoterism*, p.35: "The individual has one great concern that exceeds all others; to save his soul; to do this, he must adhere to a religion, and to be able to adhere to it, he must believe in it. . . ."
41. At a consultation on "Esoteric Anthropology" at the 1984 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, S.H. Nasr stated the need for a general clarification of the relationship between the terms "tradition", "perennial", and "esotericism". Our concern is to deal with claims by those who support non-traditional approaches to perennial philosophy. Traditionalists, whom we call "devolutionists", are skeptical about such possibilities.
42. *Interviews with Oscar Ichazo*, New York, Arica Institute Press, 1981, p.8f. See also Ken Wilber, *Up from Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution*, Garden City, New York, Anchor/Doubleday, 1981, pp.298-328.
43. *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition*, New York, Harper and Row, 1977, p.74.
44. See *The Human Process for Enlightenment and Freedom*, New York, Arica Institute, 1976, p.58f.: "The diamond state, the seedless state, is the pacification of our being. Then it is possible to say that since we know that there is a process in human beings, and since we know the measurement in that process, we can know exactly where they are". The prototype is that against which humans can measure themselves. It is the soul connected with the adaptation instinct which we discussed above.
45. Jewish Kabbalists speak of Adam Qadmon. Ichazo reveals another name; see also Guénon, *Multiple States*, p.101. In

the Lurianic Kabbalah, the soul (*neshamah*) of each person is understood to be rooted in the soul of the Edenic Adam which itself contained the powers of Adam Qadmon, the archetypal human who is the microcosm. See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, New York, Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1974, pp.52-165.

46. Majjhima-Nikaya, 72. Cited by Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy*, New York, Samuel Weiser, 1974, p.2.
47. Smith, *Forgotten Truth*, p.78.
48. Nasr, *Knowledge*, p.208.
49. Wheaton, IL, The Theosophical Publishing House, 1982, p.75.
50. Schuon, *Transcendent Unity*, p.149.
51. See Guénon, *Multiple States*, p.78: "It is as an individual that man is characterized by reason, or rather by mentality, including this broader term reason, which is one of its aspects, and doubtless the principal one".
52. Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, Gustavo Polit and Deborah Lambert (trans.), Bloomington, World Wisdom Books, 1982, p.8f.
53. Nasr, *Knowledge*, p.207.
54. *Ibid.*
55. Schuon, *Transcendent Unity*, p.150.
56. Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, p.13.
57. Schuon, *Transcendent Unity*, p.152.
58. Guénon, *Multiple States*, p.115f.
59. See *ibid.*, p.124.
60. Schuon, *Transcendent Unity*, p.153.
61. Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, p.8.
62. Smith, *Forgotten Truth*, p.87.
63. *Ibid.*
64. Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, p.6f.
65. *Ibid.*
66. Nasr, *Knowledge*, p.41.
67. *Ibid.*, 124.
68. Rorty, *Consequences*, p.xliif.
69. Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, p.20.
70. *Ibid.*, p.16.
71. *Ibid.*, p.11.
72. See Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1963, chs 2 and 3.
73. Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, p.16.
74. Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p.20.

75. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p.161.
76. Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p.7.
77. *Ibid.*, p.8.
78. *Ibid.*
79. *Ibid.*
80. *Ibid.*, p.9.
81. Wilber, *Up from Eden*, p.312.
82. *Ibid.*, p.313.
83. Schuon, *From the Divine to the Human*, p.78n.
84. New York, McGraw Hill, 1983; repr. Boulder, Shambhala, 1984.
85. *Interviews with Oscar Ichazo*, p.13.
86. *Ibid.*, p.175.
87. *Ibid.*, p.53f.
88. *Ibid.*, p.92.
89. *Ibid.*, p.54.
90. It is not the function of this paper to lay out extensively or to evaluate Ichazo's analysis of the historical development of logic. In the West he sees three major stages which he designates formal logic (which was given its most influential formulation by Aristotle), dialectics (Hegel), and trialectics (Ichazo). In this view, each stage signals an advance in the mental functioning of civilization as a whole. Trialectics, he believes, will be the final logic — which affords the best match with reality and which, therefore, lawfully and objectively unites our experience of the interior and exterior. In addition to Ichazo's *Between Metaphysics and Protoanalysis* (cited above, n.1), see Robert Horn, (ed.), *Trialectics: Toward a Practical Logic of Unity*, Lexington, MA, Information Resources, Inc., 1983.
91. Wilber, *Up from Eden*, p.284.
92. *Ibid.*
93. Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980, p.257.
94. Barfield, Listening to Steiner, *Parabola* 9(4), 1984, p.99.
95. Note Wilber's use of the distinction between "legitimate" and "authentic" categories of religion in his *A Sociable God*. Note also the discussion of perennial philosophy in relation to modernity in Sheldon R. Isenberg and Gene R. Thursby, "A perennial philosophy perspective on Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatism", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 17(1&2), 1985, pp.41-65.