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The Philosophy of Perennial Wisdom in the Traditionalist School¹

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Abstract. Through this academic study, we seek to explore the intellectual roots of Perennial Wisdom and its manifestations in contemporary philosophical thought. This will be achieved by examining a set of philosophical inquiries aimed at clarifying and revealing the essence of truth as expressed in this wisdom, as well as the methods employed in addressing such epistemological topics. Our approach is based on the perspective advocated by what is now referred to as the Traditionalist School or the Perennial Philosophy.

Keywords: philosophy, perennial wisdom, traditionalist school.

Introduction

This school is founded on a crucial epistemological principle: the belief in a transcendent, pre-existing body of knowledge that is shared across all civilizations, predating rational thought and philosophical inquiry. This body of wisdom is associated with the existence of prophetic wisdom (*philosophia perennis*), which is embedded within all human civilizations. The *secret history of humanity*—the historical record that extends beyond conventional historical narratives—suggests the existence of a nucleus or spark of truth that appears and disappears throughout

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different epochs, governed by a cyclical rhythm determined by higher laws. This truth is sometimes taught openly, dominating entire civilizations and shaping their intellectual landscape, while at other times, it is transmitted in secrecy to a select group of initiates seeking enlightenment.

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a key figure in esoteric philosophy, referred to this truth as the sacred doctrine, emphasizing that during the golden age of humanity's distant past, this wisdom was accessible to all and was not the exclusive domain of a particular group. However, due to the gradual rise of self-interest and individualism, the guardians of this wisdom—the enlightened sages—chose to impart these essential truths only to carefully selected and worthy disciples who could safeguard them through the tradition of esoteric knowledge.

These philosophical inquiries play a crucial role in today's intellectual discourse, as they contribute—according to their proponents—to redefining humanity's worldview and shaping a new perception of reality. In this context, we raise several important questions:

1. What is the Traditionalist School, and who are its key thinkers?
1. What are the major ideas promoted by this school?

I. The Concept of the Traditionalist School or Perennial Philosophy

The Traditionalist School, also known as Perennial Philosophy, represents a universal and timeless body of knowledge that has existed throughout different eras and civilizations. It seeks to explore fundamental metaphysical principles that transcend cultural and historical boundaries. This philosophy is based on the idea that there is an eternal wisdom inherent in all religious traditions, which can only be fully understood through spiritual intuition, sacred rituals, symbols, and divine revelation.

Perennialists argue that insight into this wisdom is not merely intellectual but is deeply rooted in the spiritual essence of humanity. While individuals may theoretically access such knowledge through external study, true understanding requires divine grace and a traditional framework that serves as a vessel for sacred teachings. This view aligns with the well-known adage: "The wind blows where it wills," implying that enlightenment is granted selectively and cannot be attained solely through human effort.

Some scholars define Perennialism as a mystical and esoteric doctrine that asserts the existence of a shared ancient heritage passed down through religious traditions. This heritage forms the core essence of all religions, with external doctrines and rituals being secondary or dispensable. The Traditionalist School gained prominence through several key figures, most notably René Guénon, who is considered its principal theorist.

II. Key Thinkers of the Traditionalist School

The Perennialist tradition is rooted in divine wisdom that is believed to have been bestowed rather than acquired. According to this perspective, wisdom was originally revealed to Prophet Idris (Enoch) through divine inspiration. Suhrawardi and many medieval scholars

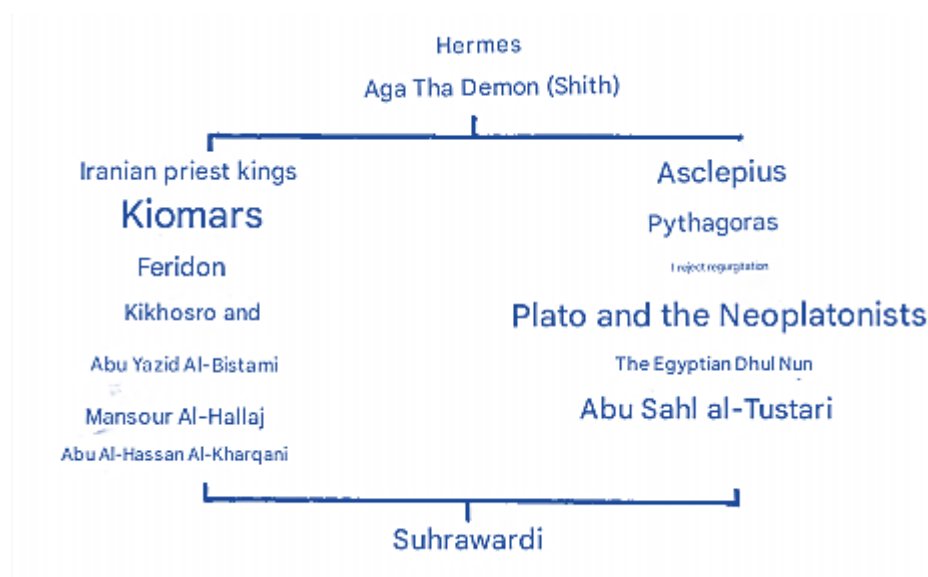
maintained that God first imparted wisdom to Idris (Hermes Trismegistus), who was regarded as the father of philosophy and sciences in both Eastern and Western esoteric traditions.

From this foundational source, wisdom branched into two distinct streams:

- One stream flowed into Persia, influencing mystical and metaphysical traditions.
- The other spread into Egypt, where it later influenced Greek philosophy and

Western thought.

This historical trajectory illustrates the continuity of wisdom from Hermes (Idris) to later civilizations, reinforcing the belief that a primordial truth has been preserved and transmitted across ages and cultures.



Key Figures of the Traditionalist School

Among the most prominent scholars of the Traditionalist School (Perennial Philosophy) are:

1. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy – An influential art historian and metaphysician who emphasized the spiritual unity of all religious traditions.
2. René Guénon (Abd al-Wahid Yahya) – The founder of the modern Traditionalist movement, known for his critique of modernity and his emphasis on metaphysical knowledge.
3. Frithjof Schuon (Isa Nur al-Din Ahmad) – A key figure in Perennialism, focusing on Sufism and comparative religion.
4. Titus Burckhardt (Ibrahim Burckhardt) – An expert in Islamic art and esoteric philosophy.
5. Seyyed Hossein Nasr – A contemporary scholar advocating for the harmony between traditional metaphysics and modern science.
6. Yasin Hamid Safadi – A specialist in Islamic aesthetics and spirituality.

7. Michel Valsan (Mustafa Abd al-Aziz) – A proponent of Guénon's ideas, particularly within the Islamic mystical tradition.
8. Huston Cummings Smith – A historian of religion who popularized Perennialism in the West.
9. Eric Geoffroy (Erik Younes Geoffroy) – A contemporary scholar of Sufism and esoteric thought.
10. Julius Evola – A controversial Traditionalist thinker focusing on esotericism and political philosophy.
11. Mircea Eliade – A historian of religion who explored the sacred in traditional societies.
12. Alexander Dugin – A Russian philosopher who integrates Perennialism into geopolitical thought.

III. Philosophy in the Traditionalist School

3.1 Wisdom and Philosophy

Before distinguishing between philosophy and wisdom, it is essential to clarify the meaning of wisdom itself. Wisdom (*ḥikmah*) is not merely practical knowledge but a profound insight into the nature of human existence, life, and the universe. A wise person does not only possess practical guidance for life's challenges but also understands theoretical truths about reality. Their practical knowledge is deeply rooted in metaphysical understanding, making wisdom both a theoretical and practical discipline.

Traditional wisdom is classified into two main types:

1. Theoretical Wisdom – Concerned with the nature of reality as it is or will be. It includes disciplines such as theology, mathematics, and natural sciences, encompassing all branches of human knowledge.
2. Practical Wisdom – Focused on human actions and ethical choices. It includes ethics, household management, and governance, dealing exclusively with human concerns and moral decision-making.

Unlike modern philosophy, which often relies solely on rational inquiry, Traditionalist philosophy integrates rational thought with spiritual intuition. While philosophy seeks knowledge through reason, wisdom transcends reason and is accessed through contemplation, spiritual discipline, and divine grace.

Thus, Perennial Philosophy bridges the gap between intellectual pursuit and spiritual realization, offering a holistic vision of truth that surpasses mere rational speculation.

Since truth is subtle and not manifestly determined, the mind, which is characterized by substance, quantity, and density, cannot fully grasp the profound and precise meanings that truth

encompasses. Philosophy, therefore, has always been used as a means of preparation for acquiring wisdom, particularly for those who love it. It aids them in becoming Sophos, or wise individuals.

Since a means should not be mistaken for an end, the love of wisdom is not wisdom itself. And since wisdom, in its essence, is the true inner knowledge, it can be said that philosophical knowledge is merely an external, superficial form of knowledge—one that holds no intrinsic value in itself. Instead, it serves as an initial stage in the path leading to the supreme, true knowledge, which is wisdom.

Thus, philosophy was merely a tool to prepare and train students for attaining wisdom by employing specific methods of preparation, including intellectual knowledge, as we shall explain.

3.2 Instruction as a Means to Attain Wisdom

Regarding the methods of attaining wisdom, certain practices have been employed that surpass philosophical preparation. These do not rely on reason alone, but rather on the soul and spirit. This approach can be called inner preparation, a practice that distinguished the most outstanding disciples of Pythagoreanism and persisted in Plato's school. It later evolved into Neoplatonism in the Alexandrian School, where it became evident, as it did among followers of Neo-Pythagoreanism.

Such inner preparation involved using words as symbolic representations—tools that aided in deep meditative focus. Through this contemplation, individuals could reach spiritual states that transcended their previous intellectual understanding. Since this level is beyond reason, it is, by extension, beyond philosophy itself. This implies that philosophy should always be understood in its conventional sense—as a rational inquiry—rather than a path to absolute truth.

To clarify and substantiate this further, we refer to the Greek philosophical tradition, particularly Pythagoreanism and Platonism. It was believed that medicine, engineering, and mathematical disciplines were general tools for preparing individuals for higher knowledge. These sciences were not set aside upon reaching this knowledge, but were instead used as symbols of spiritual truth.

For Plato, geometry was considered an essential preparation for all branches of his teachings, to the extent that it was said:

"Let no one ignorant of geometry enter here."

The meaning of these words becomes clearer when compared with another saying attributed to Plato:

"God always practices geometry."

Here, the term "God the Architect" refers to Apollo.

Thus, philosophical and rational sciences served as a gateway to the realm of wisdom. The primary goal of this preparation was to awaken the inner faculty of wisdom, which exists within every human being. Aristotle expressed this idea, stating:

"A being is one who knows its own essence, for therein lies true sovereignty... True knowledge transcends the level of reason, and we see that its realization is, in essence, the realization of the being itself."

From this, we conclude that philosophy was used as an intellectual tool for preparing and training seekers of wisdom, enabling them to become wise. However, it was never an end in itself, but rather a prelude to wisdom. Wisdom, in turn, is bestowed by the divine upon those who are prepared to receive its sacred flow. This is reflected in Socrates' words:

"I do not call them wise, for this name is too great to belong to any but God alone. Instead, I call them lovers of wisdom—philosophers."

3.3 Aristotle and the End of Philosophy

It is important to note that considering reason as the sole tool for philosophy has been a subject of criticism by many thinkers, particularly those from traditional intellectual heritage, such as Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi. He argued that philosophy had become confined to rational inquiry alone, which led him to oppose Aristotelian philosophy, as it expanded the role of reason and made philosophical inquiry entirely dependent on it. This stance led to the conclusion that:

"Philosophy came to an end with Aristotle, as he sealed the tradition of wisdom by restricting it solely to the realm of reason."

4. Epistemology and Prophetic Sciences

4.1 Theory of Knowledge

The Algerian thinker Hammou Ben Issa argued that human history has passed through several stages. He stated:

"In ancient times, spiritual power prevailed when humanity was in its best state. It manifested through innate purity, extending its authority over both the soul and the body. This meant that divine inspiration illuminated human thought, speech, and actions in the form of complete servitude, where one sought nothing but the divine will. This spiritual power existed outside the legal framework of reward and punishment. However, in later stages of human development, this original nature became obscured, remaining only within a small elite—prophets, saints, and messengers—while for the general public, it took the form of conventional faith, mixed with a desire for security and solace, as well as fluctuations in belief."

If faith is a matter of the soul, what are its epistemological dimensions? Answering this question requires a return to the symbolism of the heart and its connection to the soul. In this regard, divine revelations and the heritage of ancient civilizations share a common perspective—affirming the central role of the heart in human existence.

Indeed, the heart serves as the center of circulation, carrying the life force (blood) to every part of the body. This is why blood has been called the "liquid soul", and due to its function in

distributing life, the heart has been metaphorically referred to as "the living center" in the discourse and heritage of all spiritual traditions.

4.2 Prophetic Sciences from the Perspective of the Traditional School

Al-Ghazali made significant remarks about knowledge that cannot originate from human effort, experience, or reasoning. Instead, such knowledge is divinely inspired—granted to prophets and saints from a higher realm. He stated:

"Know that the essence of man, in his original nature, is created in a state of complete emptiness—void of knowledge about the divine realms, whose number is known only to God, as He says: 'None knows the hosts of your Lord except Him' (Al-Muddathir 74:31)."

Human awareness of these realms comes only through perception, with each mode of perception granting access to a different level of existence. By "realms," he referred to the different types of existent beings.

1. The First Stage: Sensory Perception
 - The first perception granted to a person is the sense of touch, allowing them to perceive heat, cold, moisture, dryness, softness, roughness, and similar qualities.
 - However, touch alone cannot perceive colors or sounds, as these qualities are non-existent in relation to that sense.
2. The Second Stage: Visual Perception
 - The sense of sight is then developed, allowing perception of colors and shapes, vastly expanding the range of sensory experience.
3. The Third Stage: Auditory Perception
 - With the development of hearing, one becomes aware of sounds and melodies.
4. The Fourth Stage: Rational Perception
 - Beyond the sensory world, a higher level of cognition—discernment—emerges, typically around the age of seven.
 - This enables the understanding of concepts beyond the physical senses.
5. The Fifth Stage: Intellectual Perception
 - At a later stage, reason develops, allowing one to distinguish between necessary, possible, and impossible realities—a level of understanding beyond the previous stages.
6. The Sixth Stage: Prophetic Perception
 - Beyond reason, there is another stage where an inner eye opens—one that perceives the unseen, the future, and other realities inaccessible to the intellect.
 - Just as the faculty of discernment cannot grasp intellectual concepts, the intellect is incapable of perceiving the truths revealed in prophecy.

○ Al-Ghazali compared the skepticism of rationalists toward prophetic knowledge to the skepticism of a child toward abstract concepts—believing them to be impossible simply because they are beyond their current understanding.

Thus, Al-Ghazali concluded:

"Some rationalists have rejected prophetic knowledge, deeming it impossible. However, this is pure ignorance, as their only argument is that they have not reached that stage themselves—failing to realize that such a stage exists beyond their level of perception."

Al-Ghazali affirms that this knowledge is neither acquired nor a product of human thought and intellect. He states: "There exist forms of knowledge in the world that cannot be attained through reason, such as medicine and astronomy. Anyone who has explored these fields knows necessarily that they can only be comprehended through divine inspiration and guidance from God Almighty, and not through experimentation. Some astrological judgments occur only once in a thousand years, so how can they be attained through experience? The same applies to the properties of medicines. This proof thus demonstrates that there is a way to perceive these matters, which reason cannot grasp—this is what is meant by prophecy. However, prophecy is not merely confined to this; rather, the ability to perceive that which is beyond the reach of reason is one of the characteristics of prophecy, among many others. What we have mentioned is but a drop from its vast ocean; we only highlighted it because you already possess a sample of it, which is your perceptions in sleep. Likewise, you have knowledge of a similar kind in medicine and astronomy, which are among the miracles of the prophets—peace be upon them—without any means for rational minds to attain them by mere reason."

The Traditionalist School's Perspective on the Rise and Fall of Civilizations or Its Political Philosophy:

The perfect human being is the one who achieves unity through willpower, balancing the psychological composition of spirit, soul, and body, without succumbing to whims that sometimes sway towards reason, sometimes towards the soul, and other times towards imagination. This individual maintains equilibrium among the faculties of anger, desire, and intellect. In other words, complete humanity is achieved when balance is maintained among the four humors within the human being—fire, air, water, and earth. The decline and collapse of civilizations result from the dominance of one of these humors over the others, leading to a worldview shaped by the prevailing temperament.

"The nations dominated by black earth, like the people of Lot, or those like Qarun, perished through earth as they were swallowed into the ground, for each is recompensed according to their deeds and nature. Those dominated by air, following their whims, perished through the barren wind. Nations governed by a fiery temperament perished through thunderbolts and scorching

winds, like the people of Hud and Salih. Those characterized by an excessive phlegmatic temperament, leaning towards water, perished by drowning, like the people of Noah and Pharaoh."

The traditional Algerian thinker Hamza bin Isa noted that human history is divided into chronological epochs, the most significant of which are:

1. The First Stage, coinciding with humanity's residence in Paradise, which has its unique characteristics.
2. The Second Stage, following humanity's expulsion from Paradise, accompanied by God's acceptance of their repentance and the conditions required to regain their lost status from the first stage.
3. The Third Stage, distinguished by general prophecy, which reached its zenith with the legislative prophecy of Prophet Noah (peace be upon him).
4. The Fourth Stage, in which we have been for approximately six thousand years, coinciding with the emergence of the era of Prophet Abraham (peace be upon him).

The fourth and final stage in human development emerged approximately six thousand years ago, marking the beginning of Prophet Abraham's era in Iraq. This period is known as the Iron Age in Greek tradition and as the Age of Darkness (Kali Yuga) in Indian tradition, due to its intellectual ambiguity and the complete inversion of the value system. This stage is characterized by the total obscuration of the innate human nature, to the extent that people deny its very existence, making way for a conflict between psychological forces and the rise of instinctual impulses. This corruption affected daily human interactions, leading to conflicts and wars between individuals and nations.

Conclusion:

To summarize the key points of this article:

1. The traditionalist school is one of the significant schools of thought in understanding human heritage across different historical periods, from ancient times to the modern era.
2. This school's worldview is based on a perspective derived from the spiritual legacy embedded in the cultural traditions of various nations.
3. Prophetic knowledge, which refers to the sciences of the prophets (peace be upon them), is the most important source for linking the present with the past.
4. Those who study the traditionalist school of thought will find a fresh perspective on various subjects, correcting many misconceptions that were previously assumed to be correct.
5. Traditionalist thought contributes to uncovering the falsehoods propagated by the modernist worldview and strives to present an alternative vision.

6. This paper presents only fragments of this school's philosophy, aiming to introduce it and encourage researchers to explore this unique intellectual framework, which seeks to reform humanity's perception of the world in an era of global chaos.

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