

Introduction

In his seminal book *Sufism and Taoism*, Toshihiko Izutsu (1914–1993) called for a cross-cultural meta-philosophy that might provide rigorous intellectual tools for comparative studies of Western and Eastern metaphysical traditions. Izutsu referred to Henry Corbin’s notion of a “dialogue in meta-history” to express the wish that “meta-historical dialogues, conducted methodically, will eventually be crystallised into a *philosophia perennis* in the fullest sense of the term.”¹ This *philosophia perennis* would be nothing less than a conceptual synthesis of the world’s wisdom traditions that, without claiming to supersede their respective doctrinal integrity, could function as a philosophical and theological *lingua franca* in a globalized world. The current project takes stock of this intellectual challenge and proposes to make a contribution toward this goal. In other words, it takes the fact of intellectual globalization as a starting point and a motivating factor for the elaboration of a philosophical metalanguage, a *philosophia perennis*. This philosophical *lingua* may function as an enlightening instrument of hermeneutics and theoretical exposition, while engaging a wide spectrum of metaphysical teachings from East and West. The current questions and challenges surrounding cross-civilizational relations makes the need for such a contribution particularly compelling and one that is likely to attract broader attention.

The expression *philosophia perennis* can be traced back to the sixteenth century. It is found, for the first time, in the treatise *De philosophia perenni* (1540) by the Italian humanist Agustino Steuco. Although the term appeared during the Renaissance, the idea of a perennial wisdom that is

1. Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 469.

common to mankind has ancient and medieval roots.² It is only in the twentieth century, with the seminal figures of René Guénon (1886–1951) and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), that a cohesive school of thought emerged centered on the idea of a universal core wisdom underlying all religious traditions. Many prominent scholars have followed in the wake of these two pioneers, beginning with Frithjof Schuon himself, and a number of reliable studies are now available that address the perennialist *Weltanschauung*.³

In the English-speaking world, the idea of a *Philosophia perennis*—or a *Sophia perennis*—has been popularized by the works of Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) and Huston Smith (1919–2016). There is no doubt that Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy*, first published in 1945, became the best-known contribution to the idea that a core metaphysical truth lies at the heart of religions and their wisdom traditions, both Eastern and Western. Moreover, Huxley’s exposition was not limited to metaphysics; it also encompassed psychology in the classical sense of a “science of the soul” and a corresponding ethics understood as disciplines that enabled recognition of the “transcendent ground of all being.”⁴ The “immemorial and universal” wisdom presented by Huxley corresponds, in essence, to the central teaching of the so-called perennialist school. In fact, many popular and scholarly essays on perennialism routinely associate the name of Huxley with perennialism. However, it must be noted that several perennialist authors, such as Gai Eaton and Kenneth Oldmeadow, have questioned this association by arguing that some of Huxley’s positions, far from being representative of the perennialists’ traditionalist outlook, reflect

2. Cf. C. Schmitt, “Perennial Philosophy: Steuco to Leibniz,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966): 506.

3. Let us mention but a few among the most comprehensive: Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), Kenneth Oldmeadow’s *Traditionalism—Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000), and, from a more historical point of view, Setareh Houman’s *From the Philosophia Perennis to American Perennialism* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2014).

4. “*Philosophia Perennis* . . . [is] the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that laces man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal.” Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), vii.

a thoroughly modernist perspective. These critiques have included, among other traits, an excessively idiosyncratic choice of sources, an intellectualist and modern bias against ritual and ceremonial life, as well as some underlying compromises with the scientific outlook.⁵ A symptom of some of these flaws is already apparent on the second page of Huxley's book. After after having acknowledged that the nature of Reality is "such that it cannot be directly and immediately apprehended except by those who have chosen to fulfil certain conditions, making themselves loving, pure in heart, and poor in spirit," the author raises the question of knowing why this is so, and opines that "it is just one of those facts which we have to accept, whether we like them or not and however implausible and unlikely they may seem."⁶ Spiritual literature is replete with the idea that only the empty can be filled and only the humble can be elevated, a principle of metaphysical limpidity that led Meister Eckhart to write that "to be empty of all created things is to be full of God, and to be full of created things is to be empty of God."⁷ Huxley takes as an implausible mystery a consequence of the metaphysical evidence of the relationship between the Real and the unreal. More generally, it could be argued that one of the main issues at stake in Huxley's work is the status of the core universal wisdom he postulated in relation to the diversity of religious and traditional teachings and practices. This is, needless to say, a complex and subtle question but there is little doubt that Huxley's outlook on the matter is significantly divergent in several major ways from the perennialist perspective. Huxley's is characterized, in this respect, by two tendencies. The first consists in all-too-often abstracting the ideas and themes of the *Philosophia perennis* from their textual connections and traditional contexts. The second—in some ways related to the first—consists in overemphasizing the effects of human limitations in discerning religious matters. It is not the purpose of this work to investigate Huxley's writings with these objections in mind. It is more pertinent to note, for our current purpose, that Huxley's version of the *Philosophia perennis* can easily be confused (by too hasty a reading) with certain aspects of Schuon's own viewpoint,

5. See Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism*, 158.

6. Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, viii.

7. Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), 288.

as will readily become apparent in a following chapter, “The Nature of Things and the Human Margin.”

Huston Smith, by contrast with Huxley, presents us with an outlook that is a direct tributary of the perennialist worldview as articulated by Guénon, Coomaraswamy, and Schuon. Smith was particularly indebted to Schuon, whom he repeatedly praised in superlative terms.⁸ In fact, Smith’s works may be approached, to a large extent, as academic permutations of major themes in Schuon’s works. There is no doubt, however, that Smith’s formulation has distinct flavors of its own. His best-seller, *The World’s Religions*, is implicitly informed by a recognition of the spiritual efficacy of each religious tradition that he considers in this work. His subsequent book, *Forgotten Truth*, is also primarily a defense of “The Common Vision of the World’s Religions” (to cite the work’s subtitle) beyond the diversity of their exclusive forms. What is most remarkable about Smith’s reflection on religions, however, is that it proceeds from outward multiplicity to inward unity, with each religious tradition drawing him into its own harmonic coherence and spiritual allure: “When I discovered Hinduism and saw its beauty and profundity, I intended to practice it, a faithful devotee, forever. But then when I encountered Buddhism and later Islam, and was dazzled by their heady possibilities, I had to try them on for size. They fit.”⁹ In that sense, Smith’s works invite contemporary readers to consider the principles of the perennialist outlook. A dominant view today is that the reality of confessional diversity constitutes an *a priori* refutation of any kind of absolute religious claim. The historical, theological, and ritual multiplicity of faiths is usually taken as evidence for relativism. Smith, on the other hand, regards this diversity of religious phenomena as suggestive of the universality found in spiritual experience and the ontological principles that it entails. Thus, in contrast to Schuon, Smith sees this transcendent unity not as an *a priori* intuition but as the outcome of a lengthy process of study and acquaintance: “Twenty years before it [i.e., *Forgotten Truth*]

8. “In Japan, I gave a brilliant lecture on Shintoism. I simply parroted what the book’s author, someone named Frithjof Schuon, had said. Later in India, I chanced upon another volume by this Schuon called *Language of the Self*, which I thought equally brilliant. Still later, I found Schuon’s *Understanding Islam* to be the best introduction to the subject and his *Transcendent Unity of Religions* one of the best spiritual books I ever read.” Huston Smith, with Jeffery Paine, *Tales of Wonder—Adventures Chasing the Divine* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 144.

9. Smith, *Tales of Wonder*, 113.

was published in 1976, I wrote *The World's Religions* . . . which presented the major traditions in their individuality and variety. It took me two decades to see how they converge.”¹⁰ In this, as in several other regards, Smith’s intellectual contribution might adequately be characterized as an attempt at formulating the basic principles of the Perennial Philosophy from within the epistemological and cultural strictures of modernity and its postmodern aftermath. Thus, it should come as no surprise that a critique of the scientific outlook occupies a prominent place in Smith’s work. In *Forgotten Truth*, he tells his readers that he once enthusiastically “jostled to join . . . [the] ranks” of thinkers convinced that “scientists’ achievements were so impressive, their marching orders so exhilarating.”¹¹ Thus, Smith’s intellectual development placed him in a particularly suitable position to address the concerns and objections of a wide array of contemporary readers. It could even be argued that the main thrust of Smith’s approach lies in its capacity to introduce traditional principles in a conceptual framework that is readily accessible to modern minds, particularly in North America. It goes without saying that any work being written today, whether perennialist or not, must also address the needs and limitations of a diverse contemporary audience. This is what Schuon meant when he wrote, in the preface to his *Understanding Islam*: “What is needed in our time . . . is to provide some people with keys fashioned afresh—keys no better than the old ones but merely more elaborated and reflective—in order to help them rediscover the truths written in an eternal script in the very substance of the spirit.”¹² This being acknowledged, it must be added that most perennialist writings do not take the *de facto* epistemological and cultural norms of modern mankind as their starting point. Or, if they do so, it is only by way of clearing the ground through scathing critiques of the modern *Weltanschauung* in their expositions of the *Sophia Perennis*.

As a final remark, it bears mentioning that Huston Smith’s contribution is also explicitly bound up with the experiential and, indeed, experimental aspects of humanity’s psycho-spiritual odyssey. This aspect of his work echoes some of Huxley’s endeavors, and it is no

10. Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth—The Common Vision of the World's Religions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), v.

11. Smith, *Forgotten Truth*, 7.

12. Schuon, *Understanding Islam* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2011), xvii.

coincidence that Smith first came in contact with the author of *Brave New World* in the context of their common interest in the effects of entheogens.¹³ Both authors wanted to give metaphysics an experimental confirmation through an exploration of the so-called “doors of perceptions” and the modifications of consciousness afforded by psychedelic drugs. While not necessarily denying the principle of the need for grace and spiritual guidance within a traditional path, these explorations stand in sharp contrast to the stern reservations of some major scholars of religion, like D. T. Suzuki, for instance, who unambiguously stated that “the world induced by LSD is false or unreal.”¹⁴ This also conforms to Schuon’s uncompromising views on the matter when he stresses the incompatibility between genuine spiritual intention and the “profanations” entailed by the “purposes of experiment” and “tangible results.”¹⁵

Although Izutsu’s call for a *philosophia perennis* originated from a sense of need, and therefore lack, there is no doubt that, when considering the development of religious metaphysics in the last five decades, important steps toward the crystallization of such a *philosophia* can be identified. Among other possible considerations, one cannot but be struck, in reviewing

13. “Huxley, when I knew him, ranked as one of the giants of twentieth-century literature. His visionary experiences with mescaline led me to use entheogens to advance one rung—forgive the wordplay—*higher* on the Great Chain of Being.” Smith, *Tales of Wonder*, 172.

14. “*The true man* refers not to a man in the ordinary sense. Rather it points to the subject or the ‘master’ of all that is experienced—the very reason for man being truly himself. It is also the *mind* in its deepest sense, or mind activity. It has no tangible form of its own, yet it penetratingly reaches every corner of the universe; it sees with our eyes, hears with our ears, walks with our feet, and grasps with our hand. . . . What religion demands of us is this *true man*. What use is there in sitting back and regarding objective visions which, however beautiful they may seem, are unreal; a doll is lifeless, after all. Only *the true man*, full of vim and vigor, will do. The world induced by LSD is false or unreal. Victims of dotting Zen teachers and addicts of one kind or another—how the place swarms with such people—like those fish stretched out in the fish market, no sign of life at all.” D. T. Suzuki, “Religion and Drugs,” in *Selected Works of D. T. Suzuki Volume III* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2016), 238.

15. “Purity of intention, as expressed and confirmed by such a vow, embraces the fundamental virtues of the soul; obviously it precludes the spiritual means from being employed for a purpose beneath the level of its own content, such as the pursuit of extraordinary powers, or the wish to be famous and admired, or the secret satisfaction of a sense of superiority; purity of intention likewise precludes this means from being used for purposes of experiment or for the sake of tangible results or other profanations of this sort.” Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism* (New Delhi: Smriti Book, 1993), 161.

the field of comparative religion, by the still hardly recognized—at least in academia—but deeply determining influence of the philosopher of religion, Frithjof Schuon. His works have been praised as eminent expressions of the kind of *philosophia perennis* Izutsu was calling for. In over two dozen books written during a period of sixty years, Schuon established himself as the principal spokesman of the intellectual current sometimes referred to in English speaking countries as perennialism. Even though they are largely independent of the usual academic channels of diffusion and protocols, his works have inspired a significant number of highly positive responses among scholars in Europe, North America, and Asia. His celebrated *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, first published in French in 1948 and then in English in 1953, has become a classic. This book, like Schuon's other works, embraces a wide spectrum of traditional material, from Hindu and Christian concepts to Islamic and Buddhist symbols. It is proposed, therefore, that Schuon's opus be given due consideration and priority when considering the possibility of a contemporary perennial philosophy.

Given the uncommonly synthetic and richly cross-civilizational character of Schuon's contribution, one may wonder why his works have not received a wider and deeper recognition in academia. There are a number of reasons for this, most of which have been addressed by James Cutsinger in the introduction to his most recent work on Schuon.¹⁶ One of the main stumbling blocks in the academic reception of Schuon has been that most of his key concepts are given inflections of meaning that do not always strictly abide by the normative sense they may have acquired in their traditions of origin. Schuon borrows a number of terms from specific religious or theological traditions while expanding their semantic scope beyond the strict confines of their respective confessional definitions. He has thereby forged a metaphysical vocabulary that is both steeped in tradition and arguably “post-modern,” as it were, in its supra-confessional outreach. These recurrent terms of Schuon's technical vocabulary, from *upāya* and *yin-yang* to “quintessential Sufism” and “vertical Trinity,” deserve close attention because they are profoundly indicative of a certain way of understanding the function and limits of conceptual expression in metaphysics and spirituality. In other words, these terms are keys in the sense that their import is primarily functional or instrumental. They are conceptual hints or allusions to higher realities and not conventional

16. James Cutsinger, *The Splendor of the Truth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).

philosophical notions. In fact, one of Schuon's main concerns has been to debunk the epistemological pretensions of philosophical totalization or the rational exhaustion of Reality.¹⁷ In the phrase "keys to the Beyond," the latter word refers not only to the inexhaustibility and ineffability of the Ultimate but also to the intellectual, spiritual, and hermeneutic shift toward the universal that is inherent in metaphysical expression as understood by Schuon. The main objective and focus of the following chapters is to develop some of the full implications of these key terms both by delving into their specific traditional denotations and by exploring their universal connotations in Schuon's universe of meaning. Such a task is particularly timely when both hardened and increasingly formal and ideological religious identities on the one hand, and skepticism or hostility toward religious traditions on the other, are gaining ground and increasingly clashing with each other.

While a growing number of books and essays¹⁸ have been devoted to Schuon in the last decade, most of them center on biographical con-

17. "The desire to enclose universal Reality in an exclusive and exhaustive 'explanation' brings with it a permanent disequilibrium due to the interferences of Māyā; moreover it is just this disequilibrium and this anxiety that are the life of modern philosophy." Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006), 77.

18. James Cutsinger's *Advice to the Serious Seeker: Meditation on the Teaching of Frithjof Schuon* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) is an introduction to Schuon's teachings written from the dialogical point of view of a professor of religious studies addressing the intellectual challenges of students in search of transcendent meaning. The exposition of Schuon's ideas is developed through a series of philosophical and spiritual clues appropriate to students' needs. This pedagogical approach allows for an engaging meditation on some of the major themes of Schuon's works. This book is therefore an accessible introduction to the works of Schuon, which does not presuppose any prior familiarity with them or an extensive background in religious studies. It is specifically written with undergraduate students and a general audience in mind. Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude's *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2001) is a more conventional introduction to Schuon's life and works. It comprises four chapters, the first two of which, authored by Aymard, sketch an intellectual biography, while the last two, penned by Laude, scrutinize some of the central and challenging dimensions of Schuon's work, namely the notion of "esoterism" and the meaning and implications of his "spiritual aesthetics." This book, by contrast with Cutsinger's, presupposes a solid background in comparative religion and some prior exposure to Schuon's work. Michael Fitzgerald's *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Sophia Perennis* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010) is the most comprehensive biography of Frithjof Schuon to date. It includes a wealth of quotations from Schuon's writings, including many excerpts from correspondence and unpublished materials. Harry Oldmeadow's *Frithjof Schuon and the Perennial Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN:

siderations or provide syntheses of his work as a whole, whereas very few academic studies have approached Schuon from contemporary critical perspectives. The present book does not delve into biographical data. Other books and essays have done so in different contexts and with various intents. At any rate, it is taken for granted that the study of a metaphysical and spiritual output does not require, in itself, any familiarity with the life of its author. The distinctive feature of this book lies elsewhere: it approaches Schuon's perspective through its cross-traditional conceptual vocabulary. This may be deemed a unique and effective approach not only for understanding Schuon's work, but also for articulating elements of a coherent "metalanguage"¹⁹ that may open the way to a rigorous and

World Wisdom, 2010) is a comprehensive introduction to Schuon's works. It provides a clear, rigorous, synthetic, and richly referenced overview of Schuon's intellectual and spiritual perspective. It was conceived by the author and the publisher as a companion volume to Fitzgerald's biography. It situates Schuon within the context of the perennial philosophy in the twentieth century. James Cutsinger's *The Splendor of the Truth* is an anthology of some of the most important chapters and essays written by Schuon. The book contains a substantial and thoughtful opening devised to introduce the works of Schuon to the specific concerns of scholars of religious studies. It is, in a sense, a scholarly case for the academic study of Schuon and for a wider and deeper consideration of his work within university research agendas and curricula. It must be added that all of the above were written by scholars whose own intellectual perspectives is indebted to Schuon, hence the suspicion and critique raised by some other scholars that the biographical dimensions of these works amount to "hagiography." Other works have taken diversely critical or skeptical stances vis-à-vis Schuon both as an author and as a spiritual figure. These works include a chapter from Mark Sedgwick's *Against the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), a section of Andrew Rawlison's *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions* (Chicago: Open Court, 1998), passages from Arthur Versluis's comprehensive study of American esoteric currents, *American Gurus: From Transcendentalism to New Age Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), and Patrick Riggenberg's *Diversité et unité des religions chez René Guénon et Frithjof Schuon* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010). These studies differ in many ways, in both scope and intent, but they tend to converge in either suggesting or assessing that Schuon's perspective entails a breaking away from traditional norms and orthodoxy. These evaluations associate what they consider to be suspicious or worrisome doctrinal developments with unconventional aspects of Schuon's biography, such as his affinity with "primordial nudity." Thus, within such hermeneutic perspectives, particular biographical elements gleaned in various private documents are interpreted as reflecting, or perhaps even inspiring, doctrinal positions deemed problematical. Finally, a thorough examination of Frithjof Schuon's life and thought can be found in Setareh Houman's *From the Philosophia Perennis to American Perennialism* (Chicago: Kazi, 2014).

19. The term "metalanguage" is not used here as implying a deficiency of language, in any of its traditional forms, in conveying adequate notions of the Transcendent. It

fruitful comparative treatment of metaphysical traditions, East and West. In doing so, this study may contribute to the growing field of cross-religious and trans-religious hermeneutics and understanding, thus facilitating their application to distinct intellectual and spiritual traditions. Thus, the perspective afforded by this approach may not only provide keys for a further understanding of one of the most important religious philosophers of our time, but it also makes a contribution to the development of a cross-religious lexicon that may function as an effective metalanguage in the study of comparative religion and mysticism.

To this end, the following chapters serve as an introduction to Schuon's work, in the sense that they provide readers with an examination of some of the fundamental tenets of his perspective, through the analysis of such key ideas as the "relatively absolute," "esoteric ecumenism," or the "metaphysical transparency of phenomena."²⁰ However, it must be acknowledged that short of some prior degree of acquaintance with Schuon's work, most readers are likely to encounter conceptual challenges due to the density and, at times, technicity of Schuon's doctrinal idiom. As a result, the following chapters might arguably be most helpful to those who have already entered Schuon's conceptual world through exposure to one or more of his books. Our hope is that such, and other, readers may find intellectual benefit in a discussion of key concepts that bring together the various dimensions of Schuon's work and, therefore, highlight its organic unity. Such might be the case, in particular, for those who, engaged in the academic study of religions, may find it difficult to situate Schuon's uncustomary syntheses in relation to more academically analytic works on specific religious traditions. Thus, the pages of this book are not exclusively focused on Schuon's work but offer, in addition, elements of theological contextualization of its key terms, as well insights into the ways they may both differ from and relate to their respective religious sources of inspiration.

simply denotes a form of "supra-traditional" language that both fully recognizes the validity of religious concepts and makes use of their ability to enlighten metaphysical and spiritual realities beyond the usual scope of their original traditional context.

20. Harry Oldmeadow's *Frithjof Schuon and the Perennial Philosophy* is a more synthetic and systematic introduction to Schuon's works than the current book. It is also more pedagogically structured and meets all the demands of a substantial, reliable, and accessible introductory work.

The Christian theologian Jean Borella has characterized Schuon's approach and mode of expression as "spherical,"²¹ no doubt by contrast with more linear modalities of metaphysical expression. Besides its connotations of density, this suggestion of circularity implies that, in Schuon's writings, the whole circumference of intellectual, traditional, and spiritual considerations is relative to a meaningful center that is in itself inexpressible. It may also imply that the dialectical circumference is symbolically connected to the center through strikingly perceptive conceptual and verbal crystallizations that create intellectual pathways of access to it. Inasmuch as these essentially metaphysical formulations provide the basic architecture of Schuon's thought, the current book could well serve as an introduction to his opus, facilitated, in particular, by an extensive selection of quotations from his works. From a slightly different point of view, a number of passages from the following chapters could be considered as ways of unpacking the densely concentrated substance of Schuon's writings. Furthermore, some of the considerations presented in this study could even be understood as meditative unfoldings and prolongations of Schuon's own insights. This manner of proceeding echoes Titus Burckhardt's characterization of meditation: "Normally, meditation proceeds with a circular motion. It starts from an essential idea, developing its diverse application in order, in the end, to reintegrate them in the initial truth which thus acquires for the intelligence that has reflected on it a more immediate and a richer actuality."²²

The very focus of this book—the notion of a metalanguage that issues from traditional idioms but also transcends them—raises fundamental questions concerning the legitimacy of any inflection or displacement of traditional meanings. Is not the Schuonian redefinition of some traditional terms problematic from the perspective of the integrity of intellectual and spiritual forms within the respective traditions? This issue, or objection, is moreover inseparable from the question of the epistemological status of Schuon's metalanguage, and of his perspective in general; thus the difficulties and challenges raised by some critics of Schuon's writings with

21. "We would readily call it [Schuon's style] 'spherical' because he instills the maximum meaning into the minimum of words." Quoted from *Etudes Traditionnelles* (Paris: January-March 1982) in Aymard and Laude, *Frithjof Schuon—Life and Teachings*, 49.

22. Titus Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008), 95.

regard to the claimed universality of their scope.²³ Schuon has himself expressed, especially in his poetry, the extent to which his experiences and personal sensibilities have shaped his perception of the world. So what meaning should we ascribe to objectivity and universality, and should we deem them incompatible with subjectivity and particularity? On some level, it is all too obvious that existential and cultural experiences help to fashion one's representation and expression of Reality. The Intellect, as Schuon understands it, is in itself free from any subjective and particular determinations, but its actualization is not extrinsically independent of its context, no more than the expression of its insights is exempt from linguistic, cultural, and personal predispositions. The intellective, although Divine in its essence, is embedded in the human, and the latter cannot but color the former. This is in itself not incompatible with intellectual objectivity and the ability to consider aspects of, and points of view on, Reality. What matters most, in this respect, is the objective receptivity of the human subject and the scope of one's contemplation, two conditions that make it possible to displace oneself, as it were. This being said, there is no question that Schuon's doctrinal elaborations are, partly, a tributary of the historical, intellectual, and cultural contexts in which they arose. To begin with, the very notions of *sophia perennis* and *religio perennis* could not but be reformulated in the context of an increasingly globalized world, one in which a wider access to a broadening array of experiences and interactions have raised unprecedented questions and called for new syntheses. The development of these notions benefitted, moreover, from a wider and deeper access to traditional sources that had been hitherto difficult of access or simply unavailable. While the historicist bent of contemporary scholarship has led many experts to treat circumstantial contexts as determining the ideological content of a given body of works, the perennialist perspective conceives of the intellectual vision as informing

23. Patrick Ringgenberg, in particular, has questioned the validity of Schuon's concepts of universality and objectivity, and opined that subjective and cultural determinations have actually shaped his outlook. As illustrative instances of such determinations, Ringgenberg points out that Schuon's artistic sensibility reveals subjective preferences and affinities that he sees as demonstrating the impossibility of attaining an "objective" and "universal" outlook. Ringgenberg, *Diversité et unité des religions chez René Guénon et Frithjof Schuon*, 325.

the contextual data, the latter being available as a kind of material that is merely contingent on the intellectual crystallization of the teachings.²⁴

Modern and postmodern paradigms are perhaps entirely based on a repudiation of the notion of objectivity in light of subjectivist relativism and the end of the so-called grand narratives of meaning being the order of the day. The intellectual thrust of Schuon's work stands in clear opposition to such views. It starts from the premise that relativism, in whatever domain and in whatever mode it may manifest, suffers from an inherent self-contradiction. In other words, claims that reject the very notion of objectivity undermine their own validity insofar as they assert the truth of relativism. In Schuon's words, the relativistic "assertion nullifies itself if it is true and by nullifying itself logically proves thereby that it is false; its initial absurdity lies in the implicit claim to be unique in escaping, as if by enchantment, from a relativity that is declared to be the only possibility."²⁵

One of the most powerful expressions, in our times, of the relativistic tendency manifests in what Paul Ricoeur coined a "hermeneutic of suspicion."²⁶ This type of critical interpretation aims at debunking the pretense of objectivity that it sees as masking unconscious presuppositions and unavowed biases that are themselves indicative of implicit or unconscious ideological determinations. By contrast, the "hermeneutic of recollection" aims at unveiling or recovering the meanings thought to be inherent in the text. The critical questioning of the very possibility

24. To take but one example, the fact that Schuon appears to have come into contact with the works of the Śaivite sage Abhinavagupta—with which he shares some deep affinities—at a later stage in his life, and probably too late to integrate them into in his own books, does not in itself lessen the scope and relevance of his insights on Tantric inspiration. Schuon mentions Abhinavagupta several times in his late German poetry: "*Wenn du in Māyās Spiel das Wahre siehst: In einem Weib, in Dingen der Natur—Sagt Abhinavagupta—zeigt sich Gott In dieser Form; die Form ist Ātmā nur. Kein Götzendienst ist dies; nein, tiefes Sehen; Buchstabenglaube kann es nicht verstehen.*" *Adastra–Stella Maris* (Sottens, Switzerland: Les Sept Fèches, 2001), 184. "When thou seest the True in *Māyā*'s play: In woman, or in the beauty of Nature, Then—says Abhinavagupta—it is God Who shows Himself in forms; the form is none other than *Ātmā*. This is not idolatry, but deep insight; Those who cling to the letter cannot understand." Schuon, *Adastra & Stella Maris* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), 191.

25. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2009), 6.

26. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970).

of objectivity is therefore based, in the first type of hermeneutic, on the hidden and not on the evident; the subjective assumptions and preferences that are perceived as underlying—and undermining—the explicit or implicit claims of objectivity. The subjective is a synonym, here, of the reality that underpins the works below the surface of the objective meaning. The two are fundamentally distinct, indeed often opposed. Unveiling the subjective strata of meaning amounts, therefore, to laying suspicion upon the objective literality of the work, thereby laying bare the realities of interest and power that it disguises. In this view of things, claims of objectivity and universality must alert the critical analyst to the underlying determination of particular subjective assumptions. In other words, there is an intrinsic discrepancy between the objective and the subjective, the universal and the particular, the former being the ideological veil of the latter. Such an understanding may be thought to preclude the very possibility of an epistemological compatibility of the particular sphere of the subjective and the universal realm of the objective, the latter being none other than the illusive projection of realities of power and interest. Schuon's view, by contrast, reflects the traditional schema of two levels of epistemological reality that are, in a way, incommensurate and yet parallel in another sense and, therefore, ought not to conflict in their respective purviews. There is no need for the individual subject to hide or deny its particularity in its own sphere of affinity since this particularity does not in itself infringe upon the intellectual recognition of principles. In other words, objectivity and universality do not have to carry the implication of a radical epistemological invalidity due to the subjective sphere of the individual. The latter may veil or prolong the former in proportion to one's intellectual receptivity and moral disinterestedness or lack thereof.

The previous considerations on the objective dimension of reality must lead us to further elucidate what constitutes its ultimate constituents in Schuon's work. This is the realm of metaphysics. This word does not refer here to the Greek etymological meaning of *meta ta physika*, the domain that lies beyond physical reality. It is not even to be taken as a synonym of ontology, or the science of "being as being," as it is often understood in philosophical discourse. In Schuon's lexicon, metaphysics is best characterized in contradistinction with the realm of "theology" and "ontology." "Theology" focuses on God, in the ordinary sense of the term, that is as Creator, Revealer, and Savior. Thus, the adjective "theological" is, in Schuon's books, a quasi-equivalent of "ontological," since God is

referred to by Schuon as Being. God is Being, and a discourse on God, that is theology, is none other than a discourse on Being, that is, ontology. In Schuon's perspective, theology relates, therefore, to God *qua* Being as the first determination of the Divine Essence, which is also the first cause of the manifold existents. The Divine Essence in itself is in no way determinate; it is beyond all determinations. The first determination, which can be capitalized as Determination, since it is the source and paradigm of all further determinations, lies "below" the Essence as such. As Being, it constitutes the ontological degree of Reality. By contrast, metaphysics pertains to the super-ontological realm, or to Beyond-Being, the Essence, and can be best characterized, therefore, by paradoxical expressions: it is the science of the limitless and the knowledge of the unknowable.²⁷

Such paradoxes call into question ordinary concepts of knowledge, and invite us to pay attention to another question of terminology, that which is implied by Schuon's use of the word *gnosis*. This term is fraught with difficulties for both historical and polemical reasons. The Greek term refers literally to knowledge, but the history of the word has been associated with Ancient Gnosticist schools and churches, a fact that has contributed to obscure its meaning. Generally speaking, *gnosis* refers to a type of spiritual knowledge by identification that is experiential and not simply theoretical. It is also widely contrasted with faith and involves, for its proponents, an epistemological and soteriological superiority over the latter. Finally, and correlatively to the previous characters, it entails the principle that true knowledge is both divine and immanent to the human being. All the aforementioned aspects of *gnosis* lead it to be vehemently rejected by ordinary religious belief on account of their apparent incompatibility with the realities of faith and grace. Schuon's view, by contrast, is that *gnosis* constitutes in fact the perfection of faith, or the actualization of its intellectual core. Moreover, Schuon contemplates *gnosis* as a kind of immanent and "supernaturally natural" grace that does not divinize humans *qua* humans, but rather highlights the most elevated meaning of human theomorphism. In

27. "Now, can Metaphysics as we understand it be defined? No, for to define is always to limit, and what is under consideration is, in and of itself, truly and absolutely limitless and thus cannot be confined to any formula or any system whatsoever. Metaphysics might be partially characterized, for example, by saying that it is the knowledge of universal principles, but this is not a definition in the proper sense and in any case only conveys a vague notion." René Guénon, *Studies in Hinduism* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), 89.

this view of things, to be fully human means to realize that which is most deeply embedded in mankind, the immanent imprint of Divinity.

In Schuon's view of gnosis, intellectual selfhood, being transcendent, must be distinguished from our personal subjectivity; that is, the former determines the contents and modalities of the latter in a universalizing manner, but it cannot be identified with it *tale quale*. Schuon's considerations on the *avatāra* provide most helpful keys in this regard as developed more fully in a chapter of this book. This is a basic gnostic insight that Schuon shares with many traditional metaphysicians and mystics. In several passages of his work, Schuon has made the point that objectivity does not amount to a de-humanization, and even less so to the disappearance, or illegitimacy, of personal subjectivity.²⁸ Schuon's metaphysics may be universal—and thus consonant with other esoteric idioms—in its doctrinal substance, as the chapters of this book seek to demonstrate, while also being legitimately personal in its delineation, emphases, and modes of expression. The doctrinal core of Schuon's metaphysical exposition lies in envisaging non-dual Reality under an indefinite number of aspects and vantage points. Its dimension of universality pertains to the receptivity of the Intellect to these aspects and points of view on the basis of its inherent recognition of the absoluteness and infinity of the Ultimate. Humanly speaking, though, universality does not entail an exhaustive grasp of all aspects of the Real, nor does objectivity signify a total identification of the individual *qua* individual with the Intellect. The limitations of the individual being are intrinsic to its definition as “individual,” but they do not in themselves constitute an obstacle to the objective recognition of the virtually unlimited aspects of the Real. While this awareness must entail a kind of death to distorting biases,²⁹ it is in no way incompatible with preferences inherent to our individual and formal affinities.³⁰ In his first book, Schuon contrasts the dogmatic

28. “This liberty or this objectivity will never be manifested by a dehumanization of the human on the pretext of metaphysical sublimity, for transcendent Truth puts each thing in its place and does not mix levels. Supreme wisdom is in complete solidarity with holy childhood.” Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (Bedfont, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1981), 233.

29. “We have written in one of our books that to be objective is to die a little, unless one is a pneumatic, in which case one is dead by nature, and in that extinction finds one's life.” Schuon, *To Have a Center* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2015), 41.

30. This duality appears in the Christian teaching of the two natures: “Christ, as the living form of God, would have to display in his humanity supernatural prerogatives

conception with the metaphysical outlook by comparing the former to “a view that supposes the immobility of the seeing subject” and the latter to “the sum of all possible views of the object in question, views that presuppose in the subject a power of displacement or an ability to alter his viewpoint, hence a certain mode of identity with the dimensions of space.”³¹ This analogy implies the virtual unlimitedness of the metaphysical perspective. It also points to its freedom *vis-à-vis* the static one-sidedness of religious theology, as suggestively expressed by Schuon’s placement of John 3:8 as an epigraph to his first published work: “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth.”³² In other words, what lies at the foundation of intellective objectivity is not the individual as such but its power of displacement in response to the diversity of aspects and points of view. In two very different spiritual contexts, Ibn ‘Arabī and Simone Weil provided parallel symbolic expressions of the universality and objectivity that is the horizon of Schuon’s work. For Ibn ‘Arabī, the summit of human perfection is the “station of no station” (*maqām lā maqām* or *maqām lā muqām*), in conformity with a mystical meaning of the Qur’ānic admonition “there is no stand (*muqām*) for you, therefore turn back [or return] (*fa-arji’ū*)” (33:13). While ordinary religious consciousness is characterized by the affirmation of God (i.e., as a stand or station), which is manifested in one’s belief inasmuch as his denial is also reflected in other beliefs, the gnostic—or supreme “knower by God”—“transcends this tragedy of an excluded, denied God . . . [and] knows, or rather, he sees, that there is nothing in the universe that is not a place of epiphany.”³³ Thus, Ibn ‘Arabī evokes the infinity of the “voyage

that it would be vain to enumerate, while, being incontestably human, he would have certain limitations as is proven by the incident of the fig tree, whose sterility he did not discern from afar.” Schuon, *Form and Substance in the Religions* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2002), 202.

31. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1984), 5.

32. *De l’unité transcendente des religions* was indeed Schuon’s first book in French, a language that was to become his primary means of exposition. However, Schuon had already published *Leitgedanken zur Urbesinnung* in 1935 with Orell Füssli Verlag in Zürich.

33. Claude Addas, *Ibn ‘Arabī—The Voyage of No Return* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2000), 98–99.

in God,”³⁴ the infinity of His theophanies, and also the limitations of the particular stations that call for an unending spiritual motion from one to the next. This is akin to Schuon’s “speculative” point of view that amounts to a perfect inner receptivity to virtually all aspects and viewpoints. As for Simone Weil, she provides her readers with a most penetrating distinction between the consideration that flows from subjective attachment and the pure contemplation of the object³⁵ that is utter receptivity “in waiting.” Here the symbolic function of spatial motion is prolonged and heightened by “temporal motion,” whereby objective reality is revealed by being purified from the superimposition of attachments that constitute so many ego-centered stases. The capacity for objectivity is intrinsically connected to what Weil refers to as the “sense of the relation,” as expressed for instance in the following passage: “We have to see things in their right relationship and ourselves, including the purposes we bear within us, as one of the terms of that relationship.”³⁶ The sense of the relation is therefore none other than the intellectual and spiritual ability to take account of aspects and points of view.

While one may recognize the reality of objectivity, hence virtual universality, resulting from a contemplative receptivity to the wealth of manifestations of the Real, the question may arise of the legitimacy of apprehending and using doctrinal teachings outside their strictly traditional framework of linguistic and cultural reference. Such concerns lead, in particular, to the further question of knowing whether the recognition of a metaphysical or spiritual reality necessarily presupposes a familiarity with its linguistic medium and its cultural or civilizational context. In

34. “The other group, containing once more God’s elite, are made to voyage in Him—the passive form of the verb *safara* is used to show that they do not undertake this voyage relying on their own rational powers but allow themselves to be guided by God to His Presence.” Ibn ‘Arabī, *The Secrets of Voyaging*, translated by Angela Jaffray (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2015), 175.

35. “Application of this rule for the discrimination between the real and the illusory. In our sense perceptions, if we are not sure of what we see we change our position while looking, and what is real becomes evident. In the inner life, time takes the place of space. With time we are altered, and, if as we change we keep our gaze directed towards the same thing, in the end illusions are scattered and the real becomes visible. This is on condition that the attention be a looking and not an attachment.” Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge, 2003), 120.

36. *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, translated by Arthur Wills (London: Routledge, 2004), 334.

an unpublished letter from 1928,³⁷ Schuon contends that the knowledge of a language does not facilitate per se the understanding of an idea expressed through its linguistic channel, no more than the ignorance of this same language necessarily prevents one from grasping the same idea. Furthermore, the content of the expression transcends the expression itself to the extent that the expression is truly symbolic and its referent therefore conceptually ungraspable independently of the symbolizing form. The perspective enunciated by Schuon is particularly relevant when the incommensurability between the metaphysical or spiritual reality and its formal means of conveyance is the most evident. Thus, in the context of a discussion on the German translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, Schuon remarks that, in the case of spiritual writings endowed with a depth of meaning akin to that of the *Tao Te Ching*, “one cannot learn to understand them by the fact of reading them, one must, as it were, understand them before approaching them.” Furthermore, Schuon notes that it would be of little importance if he were not to know the meaning of certain words, or even to be unable to mentally conceptualize particular statements. These two remarks relativize, without mooting, the significance of the exactitude of a translation and, by the same token, that of the understanding of the original language of expression. What this means, in effect, is that a knowledge of Chinese, even if it be outstanding, in no way guarantees access to the intellectual or spiritual essence of the *Tao Te Ching*, while ignorance of the language is not, in itself, incompatible with such an understanding, provided that the human consciousness that approaches it conforms to its intended meaning.

The aforementioned remarks are of the utmost importance in providing an entry into the epistemology that governs Schuon’s works, one that he shares with esoteric teachings from East and West. This epistemology is not analytic and *a posteriori* but synthetic and *a priori*. What is meant by these terms, echoing Kant’s terminology but lending to it a radically different meaning than the one envisaged by the “sage of Königsberg,” is a distinction between a discursive and deductive concept of knowledge and one that may be best defined as intuitive and anamnestic. The former stems from an analytical grasp of the meaning inherent in concepts and the words that convey them. To understand means to extract meaning, as it were, from terms and notions. By contrast, Schuon’s epistemology—which may be termed Platonic in a broad

37. Letter of January 2, 1928. Quoted with the permission of the Schuon estate.

sense—sees the act of understanding as presupposing a prior knowledge of the object that is understood, whereby concepts and terms are only occasional means of actualization. In other words, one can know only that which one already knows, often without knowing that one knows it. It follows from the premise of this epistemology that understanding does not, and cannot, depend upon a literal grasp of conceptual terms. Meanings, of course, are immanent to a text, but they can be accessed, as the case may be, with minimal support from the text. The text is a symbol and not merely a discursive repository.

The foregoing remarks legitimize the epistemological practice of using traditional notions with a degree of freedom vis-à-vis their long-established roots and contexts. Needless to say, serious concerns about this approach are likely to be raised by representatives of the various traditions as well as from the academic world. One possible way of tackling this critical question is by considering the relationship between formal expression, meaning, and Reality as elucidated through basic semiotical categories. In this regard, it has been proposed that one may envisage three principal ways of “making sense”: the syntagmatic, the paradigmatic, and the symbolic.³⁸ The syntagmatic meaning derives from a kind of horizontal relation between the terms of a sequence. What is emphasized here is the way in which the meaning of a given term is dependent on its relationship with what precedes and follows it. Thus, there is a traditional syntax, as it were, that is integral to any religious universe of meaning. How we understand the Book differs, for instance, in Christianity and Islam according to its sequential position in a tradition’s economy. As for the paradigmatic meaning, it refers to vertical alternatives as opposed to the horizontal elements of a sequence, that is, they are viewed as “brothers” rather than “neighbors.”³⁹ For instance, the meaning of the Book in Islam is derived by way of contrast from the perspective of the Word made flesh in Christianity notwithstanding their shared sacred framework. As for the symbolic meaning, it is predicated on an ontological correspondence, or even consubstantiality, between the signifier and the signified, with the latter, however, remaining transcendent to the limitations of the former, while being conceptually unfathomable independently of it. Schuon’s understanding of the meaning of metaphysical and spiritual expression

38. Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 210.

39. Barthes, *Critical Essays*, 207.