Perennial Philosophy

The perennial philosophy, or philosopha perennis, may be understood as a self-consistent metaphysical and ultimately soteriological doctrine regarding the nature of reality which has been readumbrated in various formulations both historically and cross-culturally.

The Term Philosophia Perennis

Historical origin: The first historical use of the term philosophia perennis has been traced to the sixteenth century Vatican librarian Agostino Steuco, who authored a seminal work of that title. It has been more popularly thought to originate with the celebrated Enlightenment philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, who made occasional use of the term in private correspondence.

Steuco was influenced by the Renaissance Platonists Marcilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, themselves influenced by Platonic, Neoplatonic and Hermetic philosophic currents, who made use of the closely related term prisca philosophia or philosophia priscorum – the venerable philosophy – emphasizing the continuity of the philosophic tradition from ancient quasi-mythic figures such as Hermes Trismegistus and Pythagoras through Neoplatonic philosophers such as Plotinus and Proclus. Ficino’s views were also shaped by his earlier contemporary, the Byzantine Platonist Gemistus Pletho. Another earlier contemporary, Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, similarly sought to articulate a conciliation encompassing different faiths and was to bear a further, independent influence upon Steuco. Another possible influence of some
five centuries earlier was the Persian philosopher Ibn Miskawayh, whose comparative
doxography *Jāvīdān khirad* – eternal wisdom – may have been known to Steuco in Arabic
translation.

**Variant uses:** The fundamental intuition supported by the notion of the perennial philosophy, as
understood by Steuco and those who preceeded him, is that of a single unified principle
encompassing all things, ascertainable through a single wisdom variously known to all traditions.
In its narrowest and specifically Western sense, it implied a conciliation between Platonism and
Christian theology; more broadly conceived, it sought a vision encompassing a multitude of
philosophic understandings and religious faiths.

Leibniz’s engagement with the notion of the perennial philosophy was much in keeping
with earlier articulations, particularly as developed in his philosophy of harmony. More recent
European philosophers, most notably Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, predominantly
influenced by Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, employed the term *perennial
philosophy* to alternatively indicate certain common conclusions, widely recurrent problems or
persistent polarities within the history of Western philosophy. The term was also appropriated by
certain neoscholastics, most notably the Thomist philosopher Maurice De Wulf, to designate the
common and enduring patrimony of high medieval scholasticism.

The notion of a common perennial philosophy in the context of modern Western
philosophy is difficult to support extensively, simply given the divergence of philosophic
positions and schools to be found therein: little conjoins idealism and nihilism or dualism and
physicalism, for example. Furthermore, whereas the original use of the term *philosophia
perennis* did not divorce wisdom from piety or philosophy from theology and mysticism, its use
in this latter context is almost wholly constrained to the domain of philosophic ratiocination. In
particular, it has no necessary bearing on the quest for the knowledge of God which is central to
the original conception of the *philosophia perennis*. The use of the term by modern
neoscholastics to apply solely to St. Thomas Aquinas and his school may be seen as a narrowing
of its original intent, while the appropriateness of this conception in light of the differences
between medieval scholastics has been largely discredited, most notably by Étienne Gilson.

*Philosophia Perennis et Universalis*

**Cross-civilizational implications:** The universal intuition inherent in the perennial philosophy
could only be broadly articulated in the context of the increased accessibility in the modern era
of the intellectual and spiritual heritage found across diverse civilizations. In this sense, the
original expression of the *philosophia perennis* was a promise imperfectly realized, necessarily
limited by a constrained knowledge in the West of civilizations other than Christianity and
Hellenism. A number of figures in the twentieth century have argued for a broader expression of
the perennial philosophy that is truly cross-civilizational. The eminent Indian philosopher
Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan recognized such a universal philosophy, while the brilliant English
writer Aldous Huxley broadly popularized this wider notion of the perennial philosophy in his
celebrated work of that title.

A school of thought that was to provide the most extensive articulation of the perennial
philosophy constellated in the early twentieth century around the French metaphysician René
Guénon, the Anglo-Ceylonese scholar Ananda Coomaraswamy and the German-Swiss
philosopher Frithjof Schuon. Termed the Traditionalist or Perennialist School, its most
significant scholarly expositor of the perennial philosophy was Coomaraswamy, considered by
such eminent figures as Heinrich Zimmer and Mircea Eliade to be one of the finest scholars of
the twentieth century. In numerous later essays, Coomaraswamy explored various themes of the perennial philosophy, displaying a consummate mastery of Indian, Patristic, Platonic and other sources. While he was primarily concerned to elucidate commonalities across multiple historical expressions of the perennial philosophy, Schuon and especially Guénon were more concerned to elucidate the doctrine of the perennial philosophy from metaphysical first principles.

Although Coomaraswamy nowhere attempted an extended systematic treatment of the perennial philosophy, such a compendium was completed under his inspiration by the American traditionalist Whitall Perry, a magisterial work that at once complements and supersedes Huxley’s earlier work.

**Related terms:** Given the universal intuition inherent in the perennial philosophy, it should be unsurprising to find closely related terms for the same conception across various civilizations. These include the Greek *prisca theologias*, *prisca sapientia*, *theosophia*, *hagia sophia* and *sophia perennis*, the Latin *lex aeterna*, the Arabic *din al-ḥaqq*, *ḥikmah ‘atīqah* and *al-ḥikmat al-khālidah*, the Persian *jāvidān khirad*, the Sanskrit *rta* and *sanātana dharma*, the Pali *akālika dhamma* and the Chinese *li* and *tao*.

**The Doctrine of the Philosophia Perennis**

**The origin:** Although the lineaments of the perennial philosophy may be traced through comparative study of the world’s scriptures, mystics and sages, its essential tenets may be derived from first principles. One necessarily and axiomatically begins with the metaphysical Absolute, that Ultimate Reality or Supreme Principle indicated by such terms as the Gottheit or Godhead of Meister Eckhart, Hyperousios or Super-Essence of Gregory Palamas, Ein Sof or unmanifested Deity of the Zohar, the Good of Plato, the One of Plotinus, Ibn al-‘Arabi’s al-Dhāt
or Divine Essence, Śaṅkarācārya’s *Nirguṇa Brahman* or attributeless supreme Reality, the eternal *Tao* or Principle of Lao Tzu, and, with certain clarifications, Nāgārjuna’s *Śūnyatā* or Voidness.

The Absolute, as such, is necessarily without limitation, restriction or determination and further is unique, all-encompassing and an absolute totality. It is necessarily partless, as the finite and relative could have no common measure with Its absoluteness and infinitude. Manifestation arises in consequence of Its infinitude or universal possibility, yet manifestation is neither separate from nor identical to the Absolute. Ultimately, there are not two realities, the Absolute and manifestation; rather, the Absolute alone is real and yet manifestation is ultimately not other than the Absolute.

**The return:** Man, as part of manifestation, participates in the inherently paradoxical relation between manifestation and the Absolute. Just as manifestation is not other than the Absolute, so man shares this indivision: although man is not the Absolute, the Absolute is present in man. “There are two [selves] in man,” as Aquinas witnesses – higher and lower, principal and contingent, real and relatively unreal. The Spirit, the trace of the Absolute within, is the Hebrew *ruaḥ*, Arabic *ruḥ* and Greek *pneuma*, as well as the *daimon* or immanent genius of Socrates, Plato’s *hegemon* or leader within, the *funkelein* or divine spark of Meister Eckhart, St. Paul’s inner man, neo-Confucianism’s *liang-chih* or inner sage, *ka* or spiritual essence of the Egyptians, and *Ātman* or Self of the Vedanta.

The Spirit is the essence and highest aspect of man; through it, man derives his entire existence, and through it also, man is not other than the Absolute. Man’s realization of his identity with the Spirit is at once his perfection, his liberation and his return to the Absolute, from which he has never been apart. This realization – the *theosis* of Hesychasm, *fanā’* and
baqā’ of Sufism, mokṣa of Vedanta and nirvāṇa of Buddhism – stands at once as the fulfillment and final proof of the philosophia perennis.

Peter Samsel

See also Axial Age; Ecumenicalism; Mysticism; Universalism; World Religions; World Theology

Further Readings


