Philosophy and Evolution of Consciousness

Robert A. McDermott

Where there is no vision the people get out of hand.
Proverbs, 29:18

A man’s vision is the single great fact about him.
William James, Pluralistic Universe

This paper aims to illumine the relationship between philosophy and the evolution of consciousness, including a brief sketch of the his-

\[\text{Footnotes:}
1\] This paper is a revised version of a talk, with the same title, delivered at the Easlen Conference, "Philosophy and the Human Future" (August 1989), which was a fitting climax of a three-year series of conferences entitled "Project for Revisiting Philosophy." All of the participants in these memorable and productive events hold in gratitude the generosity of their benefactor, Mr. Laurance S. Rockefeller, and conference organizers, particularly Jay Ogilvy.

2\] A longer version of this paper was published under the same title in Cross Currents (Fall 1990). My gratitude to Joseph E. Canseco and William Birmingham, co-editors of Cross Currents, for permission to republish this paper, and to William Birmingham for expert editorial improvements.

Prior to my finding the writings of Rudolf Steiner in 1975, my understanding of the evolution of consciousness was influenced, successively, by the American process philosophers (particularly James, Dewey and Whitehead), by S. Radhakrishnan, Henri Bergson and Teilhard de Chardin, and then very substantially by the writings of Sri
tory of philosophy from its beginnings until its possible eclipse in our time, and suggestions concerning ways in which philosophy can advance the evolution of consciousness. Such an advance can take place by means of a method and practice of philosophical imagination, particularly through applying this meditative philosophic discipline to the workings of philosophy in relation to the evolution of consciousness. When practiced as a spiritual discipline, as meditative thinking, philosophy can and should play a distinctive—perhaps decisive—role in showing the way out of the present crisis of consciousness.

To the extent that an account of the evolution of consciousness succeeds in describing the history of philosophy and its contemporary possibilities, it stands in contrast to the the philosophical position expressed by Huston Smith (above). Because I also claim, however, that consciousness evolves by virtue of a spiritual source and goal, my position also lends itself to comparison and contrast with the philosophical position shared by several American pragmatists, particularly by William James. While this article focuses primarily on the relationship between my position and the perennialism of Huston Smith, I also present an account of the evolution of consciousness which falls approximately midway between perennialism and American pragmatism.

Aurobindo, for which see my Essential Aurobindo (West Stockbridge, MA: Lindisfarne Press, 1988; originally 1975). The version of the evolution of consciousness operative in this paper is based substantially on the writings of Rudolf Steiner, for which see my Essential Steiner (NY: Harper & Row, 1984), and the thought of Owen Barfield, particularly Barfield’s writings, by his own admission, see based on the thought of Steiner, they are included in the 85-page annotated bibliography in The Essential Steiner.

For writings on the undeniably prominent announcement of the death of philosophy, see especially Kenneth Barnes, James Bohman and Thomas McCarthy, eds., After Philosophy: End or Transformation? (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), and Avner Cohen and Marcelo Dascal, eds., The Institution of Philosophy: A Discipline in Crisis (LaSalle, Ill: Open Court, 1989).

For the perennialist writings of Huston Smith, see especially Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition (NY: Harper & Row, 1976); "Is There a Perennial Philosophy? (Journal of the American Academy of Religion, LV:3, 553-66); "In Ossis-Theology Passes or Can Religion Endure the Death of Metaphysics?" (Religion & Intellectual Life, Spring 1986, pp. 7-14); "Philosophy, Theology, and the Primordial Claim" (Cross Currents, Fall 1986, 276-85).

For a critique of Huston Smith’s metaphysics of unity, see Eugene Fontinelle, "In Defense of Which Metaphysics? A Response to Huston Smith" (Religion & Intellectual Life, Spring 1986, 28-38); For Fontinelle’s own position, see "Faith and Metaphysics" (Cross Currents, Summer 1988, 129-45).

In two recently published articles I discuss Huston Smith’s perennial philosophy: "Philosophy as Spiritual Discipline," Towards (Winter 1989), and "Towards a Modern Spiritual Cognition," Revision (Fall 1989).

Readers of Huston Smith will be unsurprised by my suggestion that he would do well to modify his perennialist position in the light of evolutionary considerations. I will try to show, again, that Smith’s claims for the timeless truth of esoteric, mystical, or perennialist intuition are not merely too broad, but unhelpful in relation to the present crisis in consciousness generally and in philosophy in particular.

Rudolf Steiner’s account of the evolution of consciousness, articulated throughout several hundred volumes of writings and lectures is more detailed and inclusive than the account of the evolution of consciousness developed accumulatively by classical American pragmatic thought from James to the present generation. Although it remains little known in the academic world, the account of the evolution of consciousness which Steiner revealed during the first quarter of this century remains the most comprehensive interpretation of its origin, principles of development, historical and scientific details and contemporary possibilities.

The position developed in this paper is daring in its unabashedly speculative reading—or, rather, in its acceptance and use of Steiner’s reading—of the evolution of consciousness, and in its proposal to lift philosophy to Spiritual Science. My middle-way affirms the mystical and the perennial, but not at the expense of the personal and cultural specificity evidenced in the evolution of consciousness; it also affirms a Jamesian tough-minded faith in the presence of a radically creative and pluralistic universe, but with a transformative epistemology. It insists that by means of meditation on our situation relative to the past and future, it is possible to work through (not around) relativistic pluralism to a mode of thinking which is at once individual and universal, temporal and spiritual, selfgenerated and revelatory.

Jamesian pragmatism, in both its classical and contemporary versions, and the perennialism developed by Titus Burckhardt, Rene Guenon, Frithjof Schuon and recently by Huston Smith, are important


philosophical positions because of their ability to bring greater intelligibility to the depth and varieties of religious experience. What they say about religious experience, however, diverges at the base: Jamesian pragmatism emphasizes the processive and the relational dimension of religious experience; the perennialist position, particularly as systematized by Huston Smith, emphasizes the esoteric, mystical, ineffable and eternal.10

While a comprehensively articulated account of the place of philosophy in the evolution of consciousness clearly has more in common with a Jamesian pragmatic contextualism than with Smith’s perennialism, Smith nevertheless offers a valuable critique of the various forms of relativism which issue from and help to sustain a shrunken view of knowledge.11 His perennialism must count pragmatism as one of the relativist positions it seeks to expose and replace, but James’ pragmatism is complemented and deepened by his life-long investigation of religious and psychical experience.

Both the perennialist and the process philosopher are working to establish a creative relationship between the relative, or contextual on the one hand, and a divine reality on the other, and both recognize the extent to which contemporary life and thought are threatened by chaos and despair. But whereas Smith puts his hope in the experience of an absolute reality as a way of transcending the relative, the Jamesian pragmatically affirms the relative and contextual.


As a complement to both of these positions, the present paper calls for an increase in meditative-imaginative thinking, or spiritual-scientific philosophizing, by which to make the history of philosophy and contemporary philosophizing more revealing concerning the secrets of the evolution of consciousness.

Drawing on Steiner’s theory of cognition and method of Spiritual Science which complements his account of evolution, this essay will recommend a spiritual scientific methodology that seems to me more productive—or at least more promising of creative results in the long run—than Huston Smith’s perennialism or Jamesian pragmatism. In effect, I am asking whether Steiner’s Spiritual Science might enable us to supplement, and perhaps deepen and transform, these positions. I am claiming that the chaos and despair which characterize our present situation can be overcome by a sympathetic, sustained meditation on the spiritual meanings and forces operative in the evolution of consciousness, including its origin, modus operandi, and possible goals. My reference to meditation is meant literally: the strengths of these two positions—and of similar philosophical polarities such as Platonism and Aristotelianism, or, that between James and Royce—can be maintained and the gap between them can be closed by thinking within them, or through them, meditatively. Or—dare we say it: lovingly.

1.

In his lecture on “History of Ideas: Evolution of Consciousness,” Owen Barfield reminds us that we tend to divide the history of man-as-knower into two periods, the period before the birth of philosophy and the period after it, and that in relation to such a divide, philosophy, and later science, have always performed a dual role:

They have operated both as effect and as cause: as effect, inasmuch as they start from and are limited by a mode of perception common at the time of their origin; as cause, inasmuch as, in the further course of time, they themselves help to bring about the formation and fixation of habits of thought divergent from those that prevailed before them. And it is from these divergent habits, from this different perception as their base, that subsequent philosophers will be starting in their turn.12

The term evolution of consciousness refers not merely to the history or evolution of ideas—with respect to ideas, or thoughts, history and evolution can be used synonymously—but rather to the changing mode of perception and thinking by which particular ideas, and not others, appropriately come into being. Great intellectual and cultural movements—referred to, since Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* as paradigm shift—18—are not, though they are generally thought to be, merely a new set of ideas or metaphors. Rather a change in consciousness involves the revision of a pervasive, unconsciously accepted framework, or of a root metaphor, or community of assumptions, which make the old ideas implausible and the new ideas obvious.

The mode of consciousness in and through which an experience or idea is put forth must affect its truth and meaning both at the time and subsequently. When we as a culture finally outgrow the Newtonian and Cartesian, and effectively replace it with a contemporary paradigm—whether Einsteinian, Jamesian or Joycean—we will also feel estranged from modern Western consciousness. This existential estrangement is so real that those of us who have begun to experience it often regard those who have not done so as innocent.14

Although it is useful to regard Nietzsche’s death in 1900 as a symbolic marker of the transition from modern to post-modern, from meaning to angst, transitions between epochs of consciousness, or between paradigms, tend to more gradual and unevenly accomplished both from one culture to the next and within cultures. In the transition were also gradual and uneven. This includes the uniquely important shift during the sixth to fourth centuries before Christ from archaic or mythic to historical self-reflective consciousness. In its drama and influence that revolution provides one of the best examples of the degree to which a comprehensive paradigm shift alters not only ideas and their meanings, but the mode of thinking which produces certain kinds of ideas and not others.

Even a brief survey of the thinkers and their influence during the sixth to fourth centuries before Christ provides a reminder of the mode of thinking before and after this period: In Greece, the beginning of philosophical speculation by Thales and other Pre-Socratics, culminating in the singular genius and influence of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle; in Israel, the moral and universalist insight of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah; in Persia, the prophet Zoroaster, whose experience of Ahura Mazda as well as the spiritual and ontological reality of darkness and light, profoundly influenced Christianity and Islam and served as the basis of Zoroastrianism; in India, Gotama the Buddha and the crystallization of the teaching contained in the Bhagavad Gita; in China, the teaching of Confucius and Lao-Tzu who, in their complementarity, established the core of Chinese philosophy and culture for the subsequent two and a half millennia (including the convulsive developments in the present century). Consciousness prior to this period in these same cultures may be broadly characterized as mythic or pre-reflective. In this mode of consciousness the self does not yet experience itself as thinker, as separate from the divine and natural world—or, rather, from the as yet undivided natural-divine world. Experiences which we take to have been profoundly transformative and revelatory, or too remarkable to be believable, might take on a quite different meaning when understood in the context of the consciousness of that time. Whereas our naturalistic, and perhaps positivist, reading of archaic and early historical experience—e.g., the consciousness recorded in the Upanishads, in Genesis and Exodus, and in Homer—tends to reduce ancient accounts of beings and realities, these experiences might be as characteristic of the second millennium B.C. as they are improbable and unintelligible in the modern (scientific) West.

Perhaps the most helpful way to understand the panorama of paradigmatic experiences—whether termed mystical, revelatory or transformative—is to regard the past two and a half millennia as a steady decline in immediate access to the divine. Owen Barfield refers to this phenomenon as the loss of participation.10 Our fascination with, and desire to recover, the examples of archaic consciousness exhibited by traditional cultures stems from a longing for the unity lost to the fragmenting function of the intellect. Hence, the popularity of the works of Jung, Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell.17 These thinkers, however, miss the other half of the drama: as the evolution of consciousness reveals a general (though irregular) loss of participation,
it also reveals a corresponding (and equally irregular) gain in intelligence.

Immediate participation is complemented by a gain of the mediated, rational and scientific consciousness. Since, in archaic consciousness, the unity of mysticism is given, an initiate could be trained, and could train others, to apprehend the divine and its secrets. In the modern West, the mystical is exceptional and dubitable because the individual has grown through separation from original unity with nature and the divine. Contemporary consciousness has been fashioned by the past two and a half millennia of thinking.

It is doubtful whether consciousness prior to the sixth century B.C.—the century of early Greek philosophers, Buddha, Confucius and their approximate contemporaries—should be understood as thinking. Obviously, the Egyptians, Moses and the teachers of the Upanishads produced important thoughts, but they apprehended, or saw, ideas as living realities. We experience these ideas as cold and crystallized, finished products isolated from the mystical experience, or mode of awareness, from which they proceeded. It was just such an ability to see, and then to communicate, such ideas, that Plato attributed to the previous Golden Age and which he wanted to reclaim through his Academy. He believed in the Ideas but could not quite see them. His great achievement was to facilitate, by a combination of intuitive memory and dialectical argument, the transition from seeing to thinking. It was Aristotle who practiced and taught, for the first time, the art of thinking, and thinking about thinking (i.e., logic), without recourse to myth or mystery knowledge.

In the medieval Christian West, seeing ideas was even less possible. Rather, in the face of this loss of participation, the medieval thinkers developed belief as a complement to reason for those realties, and corresponding levels of knowledge, which could not be reached by reason alone. Philosophers who read the history of philosophy so as to disregard the medieval period—or more likely, the two thousand years between Aristotle and Descartes!—miss the drama contained in the evolution of consciousness: the medieval thinkers represent the transition from the Greek memory of seen ideas to the apparent complete loss of participation in the modern West. The nine hundred years between Augustine and Aquinas represent a loss of illumined reason and a corresponding gain in empiricist epistemology which would lay the foundation for a mode of philosophizing, three centuries hence, based on and supportive of empirical science.

If Greek philosophy represents a transition from Greek myths and mysteries to dialectical reason, and medieval philosophy represents a transition from Greek intuition and argument to modern scientific philosophy, modern philosophy itself can be understood not only on its own terms, but equally as a transition. And, in a way which resembles the previous transitions, there may be an overall direction, accompanied andabetted by many less important currents, some complementary to and others in polar relation to, the prevailing paradigm. The Greeks produced Sophists, Stoics and Epicureans as well as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, as 17th century French philosophy includes Montaigne and Pascal as well as Descartes, and the 19th century includes Emerson, Kierkegaard and Newman as well as Comte, Marx and Mill.

Every field of contemporary thought includes a bewildering array of positions and a polar opposite for each. If we take a long view of philosophy in evolution, we can nevertheless offer a broad characterization of 20th century philosophy which clearly distinguishes it from the thought of earlier periods, and, presumably, of periods to come. To be adequate, any such characterization must await the full unfolding of explorations of schools and movements such as those working out of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Marxism, Asian and comparative philosophy, as well as the two positions with which we are concerned in this essay, the pragmatic tradition of James and the mystical-perennialist tradition as defended by Huston Smith.

Huston Smith leaves no doubt that a philosophy based on mystical experience, or intuition of a perennial truth, stands at the opposite side of the philosophical spectrum from Jamesian pluralism and pragmatism:

Is there any way we can take seriously the possibility that our own cultural-linguistic epoch, say, may have taken a wrong turn; and again, if so, by what criterion? Pragmatic outcomes seem to be the only court of appeal, but though useful for provisional purposes, pragmatic criteria never tell the whole story, for if cockroaches are to inherit the earth, that would not induce us to consider them our superiors. Cultural-linguistic holism stammers answers to relativism; it can counter "vulgar relativism" by appealing to currents of consensus that underlie superficial differences. But this no more saves the day than the structural sturdiness of a house redeems it if it is about to slide off its mountain perch.  

In sharp contrast to the cultural-linguistic relativism tolerated by a pragmatic criterion of truth and meaning, Smith esposes a view which he synonymously refers to as traditionism, perennialism and primordialism:

"Ontologically, primordialists claim that we are bound to the ultimate so completely that in the end it is difficult if not impossible to differentiate us from it.... Epistemologically, they claim that we can know our divine identity. Historically, they claim that the first two claims constitute the core of the Revelation that has spawned and powered the world's enduring religions."  

Smith argues that the Absolute, or more accurately the esoteric or mystical experience of the Absolute, solves the problem of relativism and at least two of its corollaries, the problem of evil and the conflict of religions. Smith's grasp of ordinary experience, with its built-in limitations and evils of all kinds, as well as his profound, first-hand experience of the world's religions, would not permit a facile disregard of the temporal and historical, but it does sustain his view that the historical is not an absolute. In addition to the temporal, there is the eternal:

In the strict sense of the word, the Absolute is eternal: it is beyond time. As the rise of process theology suggests, the modern world's absolutizing of time has made God's eternity the greatest stumbling block of traditional theol-

ogy. Whitehead and Hartshorne concede timelessness to God's abstract outlines, but not to the concreteness those outlines contain.

Translated to the phenomenal plane, the absolutizing of time produces historicism. The traditionalist does not dispute the obvious fact that we are historical beings, or even that we are radically such. The question is whether we are totally such, which is to say historically without remainder.  

There is surely something true in this claim that we, and indeed the universe, are not merely historical, but have an eternal dimension. As philosophers, theologians and ordinary believers have sought to know since the dawn of philosophic thinking in the sixth to fourth century B.C., however, the difficulty is to hold to the eternal dimension without sacrificing the meaning and value of the historical. The evolution of consciousness is again relevant in that it provides a picture of those epochs in which, or for which, the eternal was given in experience as real and immediately accessible. In recent centuries, as a result of the shift in consciousness which produced, and has in turn been captured by, the scientific-historicist-relativist paradigm, the experience of the eternal-absolute has been almost entirely out of reach except at the expense of the temporal.  

Immediately following the text quoted above, Huston Smith points to a phenomenon which he takes as support of the ability of a thinker such as Anselm to transcend his own time and thereby serve as an exception to "unrelieved historicism":

Anselm once said that St. Paul understood Moses far better than he and his contemporaries could. In so saying he acknowledged time's toll; he admitted that it had disadvantaged his generation in comparison with Paul's on the point in question. What in return does historicism concede to Anselm by way of his capacity to transcend his times enough to recognize that Paul's times allowed things his own did not while the age of Moses allowed even more? Unrelieved historicism is unrelieved relativism in its tem-

24 Ibid., p. 297.
25 Perhaps the most forceful account of the degree to which an affirmation of the eternal grants one's commitment to the temporal is to be found in John Dewey, The Reconstruction of Philosophy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1957; originally 1920) and The Quest for Certainty (NY: Capricorn, 1950; originally 1929).
poral mode, and as Hilary Putnam has stated outright, relativism is unlivable.20

Without sacrificing the reality of the eternal for which Huston Smith argues so compellingly, and the possibility of our experiencing the eternal in the temporal, I nevertheless want to urge that this example has a different lesson: assuming that Moses, Paul, Anselm and a spiritual genius of our own time—e.g., Sri Aurobindo or Rudolf Steiner—possess comparable powers of understanding, then the difference between them is not merely what their respective times allow, but that they exhibit quite different modes, qualities, capacities of consciousness.

Moses transmitted the will and words of YHWH, the God of the Hebrew People.27 Anselm lived in, and of course, as do all great thinkers, transcended his time, but not so completely as not to experience the contrast in consciousness characteristic of his time and consciousness at the time of Moses. Paul was not only closer in time to Moses than was Anselm, but was a beneficiary of spiritual forces wrought by Jesus Christ into the community for which he was spokesperson. Anselm was a Christian contemplative—i.e., a meditator—as well as a philosopher and theologian, but neither he nor the consciousness of his age gave him access to the consciousness of Moses.

Because the modern Western (scientific) consciousness in which most of us participate severely restricts what counts as knowledge, it limits our access with respect not only the consciousness of Moses, but also to Anselm and Paul, and other figures for whom spiritual realities were directly knowable. It is the more remarkable—and for me, the more unbelievable—that a figure such as Rudolf Steiner should break the seemingly unbreakable hold of the age by penetrating the consciousness of all of these figures, as well as the consciousness of other such paradigmatic figures as Buddha, Krishna and Zoroaster. The supersensible powers of clairvoyant figures like Swedenborg and Steiner are so at odds with the limits set by their age that they are perhaps best understood—much like Krishna, Buddha, Confucius and Lao Tzu—as heralds of a new age.

We do not know the extent of the transformation which is possible in our time, but Steiner’s uniquely revealing three hundred and fifty volumes28 might be an indication of a dramatically new capacity. They offer, at least, a vast array of claims—and a method by which to test them—concerning figures like Moses, Paul and Anselm, and their meanings in the context of the evolution of consciousness from their time to the present.

In one of his memorable texts, Huston Smith compares the esotericist intuition to the awareness of light:

Blue is not red, but both are light. Exoticists can be likened to people who hold that light isn’t truly such, or at least is not light in its purest form, unless it is of a given hue. Meanwhile academics have become so fearful that a hue will be overlooked or that some that are known will be victimized—marginalized is the going word—that they deny the existence of light itself....

The primordialist believes that there is such a thing as light in itself—pure white light that summarizes all the wave-lengths—and that it is the Light of the World.29

Smith is undoubtedly justified in his portrayal of academics as so motivated more by a desire to know, and particularly not to miss, the particular hue that they remain ignorant of the idea in itself.30 But the perennialist position not only can easily miss, and undervalue, the various hues in the quest for the Light, but generally fails to show the relationship to various colors both before and after the experience of the Light.

For the Perennialists, as well as mythologists like Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell, fundamental shifts in consciousness, or shifts from one to another hue of historical and cultural expression—e.g., from archaic to classical to modern—seem to be of little or no consequence. Eliade offers vivid accounts of archaic consciousness but pays little attention to the place of the archaic in the evolution of consciousness. But the most flagrant lack of historical and evolutionary awareness is to be found in the works of Joseph Campbell, for whom spiritual beings and historical figures of widely disparate times and cultures all figure in his mythological grids without any regard to their personal biographies or historical missions.

20"Philosophy, Theology and the Primordial Claim," p. 287.
21Moses had previously been initiated into Pharaonic mystery wisdom. See Rudolf Steiner, Turning Points in Spiritual History (Blawurtb, NY: Garber Communications, 1967), and Emil Boch, Moses (NY: Inner Traditions, 1986).
24William James pointed out that most philosophers of his day were willing to miss the truth in their desperate effort to avoid error.
Huston Smith is more sensitive to cultural and historical differences than Eliade or Campbell, but his case for the mystical experience and perennial philosophy runs a high risk of missing the ways in which the cultural and biographical context actually adds to the meaning, and helps to account for the truth of mystical experience. Smith's perennialism seems to me an inadequate solution for the present situation because it does not disclose the inner meaning of particular contexts—e.g., the mission of Krishna and Buddha relative to the Christ, or the genius as well as the limitation of Greek and Christian philosophy, or the meaning and destiny of the West, and of America. Spiritual Science calls for a meditative, spiritually penetrating focus on these questions which issue from, and attempts to join, the individuality of the thinker and the spiritual realities which stand behind the thinker.

Meditation on the problem of an ineffable Absolute in relation to the relative can call up an image of a divine source expressing itself positively as and through the natural and the human, the spatial and temporal. By meditation, the gap between either-or can be transformed into both-and: the mystic knows by earned experience that the created world, and particularly the individual human being, has its being in and through the divine. Or, in some accounts of mystical experience, the human and natural, when fully and truly grasped, are divine. The more thoroughly the mystic knows the world, the more revealingly and creatively he or she can articulate its divine source and content in a way which serves the human as well as the divine.

In opposition to Smith's case for an experience of the ineffable which is impervious to cultural relativism, I side with pragmatic contextuality for all truths and meanings. Whereas Smith divides religious experience into esoteric and exoteric (or mystical/religious), I want to affirm contextuality and degrees of difference, and put all claims for the absolute and the privileged to the pragmatic test. Spiritual Science is a difficult but promising way of apprehending the kind of realities to which the Jamesian pragmatist seeks access.

Without a transformative spiritual discipline, and an epistemological account of such transformation, a pragmatic faith would seem to be impossible. Such faith may be necessary for a start, but as maybe as ordinary religion and ordinary science to penetrate to the inner meanings of natural, personal and historical realities. Pragmatism as a philosophic method may be necessary and productive of positive results but as a vision or metaphysics it needs to be supplemented by a spiritual or meditative discipline which can combine, and transform, the mystical and the practical. The Spiritual Science formulated by Rudolf Steiner might prove itself a radical empiricism capable of this transformative power.

As applied to mysticism and processive pragmatism, a radical empiricism based on Steiner's Spiritual Science would strive to join, or experience the joining, of the spiritual and the perceptual in every act of thinking. In so doing, the radically empirical thinker would become conscious of the fact that we typically regard as thinking what is in fact passive observation, and as a result fail to develop a truly self-conscious method of thinking. Such a practice might take as its ideal the advice offered by Emerson in the opening paragraph of "Self-Reliance":

A man [person] should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his.31

Because we do not think actively, we miss the inner reality, and settle for the appearance, for the idol—the image without its inner meaning. Barfield's definition of idol and idolatry is worth pondering:

The difference between an image and a thing lies in the fact that an image presents itself as an exterior expressing or implying an interior, whereas a thing does not. When what begins by being an image becomes in course of time a mere thing, we are justified in describing it as an idol. And a collective state of mind, which perceives all things and no images, may thus fairly be characterized as idolatry.32

The task of exposing and overcoming the idolatrous habit of mind may well be the most pressing task of philosophy—simultaneous with rather than subsequent to the obvious first priority of nuclear-free peace, for the arms race is itself a manifestation of idolatry. Both the mystical and the practical can be turned into idols. So can Anthroposophy—and in a way which is reminiscent of the sad fate of religions, since it was brought into the world by Rudolf Steiner at the
beginning of this century, many of its enthusiasts have reduced it to an image without its inner meaning.

When the processive and the practical are idolized, we get the merely pragmatic, process without arché (foundation, original structure, principle) and without telos (aim, purpose, modus operandi). James was extremely effective in exposing excesses (i.e., idolatry) within and about science and religion, and in this respect his thought is nicely supplemented by analyses of science and religion in Steiner, Barfield and Kuhlewind. But Barfield seems to me to go furthest in exposing all manner of idolatry, including the degree to which openness to novelty and a corresponding aversion to arché and telos can themselves be made into idols. Although James resisted a too easy agnosticism by his exhaustive, and exhausting, study of the varieties of religious and psychic experiences, a too easy pragmatist, he was not entirely successful in devising a method for allowing the concrete, whether objects, events or ideas, to disclose their spiritual contents.

As an antidote to a pragmatism which knows too little, or too hastily, the source, the inner meanings and the possible goals of the evolutionary process, I think that, instead of relying primarily on James, it would be more promising to build on Royce's Beloved Community or the vision of a transformed world articulated by Sri Aurobindo, and more promising still is the combination of the evolution of consciousness and the method of Spiritual Science as formulated by Rudolf Steiner and extended by Owen Barfield and Georg Kuhlewind.

The problem with Smith's position is nearly the reverse of James's. Although he recognizes the limitations of ordinary thinking for the solving of the ultimate questions, and affirms a something-more


1See Josiah Royce, The Problem of Christianity (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1898), and Frank M. Oppenheim, Royce's Mature Philosophy of Religion (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1987).


3See Georg Kuhlewind, Stages of Consciousness (1904), Beaming Aware of the Logo (1955), and From Normal to Healthy (1980), all published by Lindafarne Press, West Stockbridge, MA.

methodology, his epistemology is inadequate because it fails to give sufficient priority to the distinctive needs and opportunities of contemporary consciousness. In tying historical epochs and cultural forms to an experience of ineffable unity, Smith removes his focus—and that of his reader—from the peculiar tasks of our time. Hence my recommendation of Spiritual Science, a methodology developed for the distinctive crises of consciousness experienced in this century. Exemplified and expounded by Rudolf Steiner, and extended by Owen Barfield, Georg Kuhlewind and others, Spiritual Science, also called Anthroposophy, is a way of spiritual and esoteric cognition, related to, but distinguished from, science and religion. Steiner writes:

The natural scientist reaches an outer world which cannot be grasped by our inner world; the mystic reaches an inner life that clutches at nothingness as it tries to grasp an outer world for which it longs.7

Working from the perspective of Huston Smith's claim for the mystic, we would recommend a meditative appreciation of the ways in which the evolutionary process in its specificity reveals the divine; from the perspective of a Jamesian processive pragmatism, we would meditate on spiritual realities to be revealed even in and through a universe which we rightly experience as pluralistic, or, in James's memorable term, as "buzzing, blooming confusion." Thinking, or at least intellectual thinking, will not be enough to bridge the gap between the divine espoused by perennialism and pragmatism: active, imaginative receptivity will be needed to transform ordinary thinking into an illumined seeing-thinking by which we might apprehend something of the divine source, or sources, behind everyday consciousness. This mode of thinking is what Steiner refers to as Anthroposophy:

Anthroposophy is a path of knowledge to guide the spiritual in the human being to the spiritual in the universe. It arises in man as a need of the heart, of the life of feeling; and it can be justified only in so far as it can satisfy this inner need.8

If we read the evolution of consciousness along these lines it will follow that neither science nor mysticism is the most effective complement to philosophy in our time. Rather, what seems to be needed, and is here recommended, is a mode of cognition which resembles science and mysticism but aims to be more will-filled, wide-awake and individu-

9Philosophy and Anthroposophy, pp. 4-5.

ally based. It is by a conscious, sympathetic meditative reflection on the evolution of consciousness, and particularly on the present crisis in philosophy as a symptom of a profound spiritual crisis, that I have come to be convinced of the need for this approach to philosophy—or, more boldly, of this means of transforming philosophy into Spiritual Science.

Whereas mysticism and science function in polar, and no doubt creative, tension with philosophy, this account of the evolution of philosophy, and of philosophy in evolution, calls for a metamorphosis of philosophy into spiritual discipline. In some measure, it represents a return to the origin of philosophy in the Greek mystery teachings which so influenced Plato, but it is also distinctively contemporary in its democratic instinct; whereas in the time of Plato, philosophy was a way of life available only to initiates in mystery centers, in principle anyone can take up the discipline of spiritual-scientific thinking as a way to achieve an intuitive understanding, for example, of the evolution of consciousness, and of the distinctive task of philosophy in the service of contemporary consciousness.9

9Heider writes:
There slumber in every human being faculties by means of which he [or she] can acquire for himself [or herself] a knowledge of higher worlds. Mystics, Gnostics, Theosophists—all speak of a world of soul and spirit which for them is just as real as the world we see with our physical eyes and touch with our physical hands. At every moment the listener may say to himself: That of which they speak, I too can learn, if I develop within myself certain powers which today still slumber within me.

In ancient times, antecedent to our history, the temples of the spirit were also outwardly visible; today, because our life has become so unspiritual, they are not to be found in the world visible to external sight; yet they are present spiritually everywhere, and all who seek may find them (Knowledge of the Higher Worlds—And Its Attainment, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1947, pp. 1-5).

Can Western Philosophers Understand Asian Philosophies?

Roger Walsh

Interest in Asian cultures and philosophies continues to grow and increasing numbers of Western philosophers are now studying them. Among these Asian philosophies, a number—such as Yoga, Vedanta, Buddhism and Taoism—are clearly mystical in nature. These schools were molded by individuals who were obviously first-rank intellectuals but were also first-rank yogis or contemplatives. That is, in addition to intellectual training they had gone through a rigorous ethical, psychophysical and spiritual discipline designed to prepare them to grasp the special knowledge that is the goal of these traditions.

Almost invariably these philosophers claim that their philosophies are of a different order from mundane ones. As Edward Conze notes "nearly all Indian, as distinct from European scientific thought, treats the experiences of Yoga as the chief raw material for philosophical reflection." They therefore claim that intellectual analysis by itself is insufficient to grasp the deepest profundities of realization and that intuition is essential. Moreover they claim that these traditions are fully