

The “Four Forces” of Modern Psychology and the Primordial Tradition¹

Huston Smith

While Huston Smith (b. 1919) needs no introduction to the readership of *Studies in Comparative Religion*, few readers might be familiar with how closely involved he has been in the advancement of humanistic and transpersonal psychology. While he is not a psychologist or therapist by profession, he has become widely acknowledged as a specialist in the area of spirituality and psychology and one could maintain that he has served as a bridge-builder between both domains. He has known many influential psychologists and therapists of the twentieth century firsthand. He has also been invited to be a keynote speaker at numerous conferences relating to humanistic and transpersonal psychology and has received an honorary doctorate from the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. Most recently, the Huston Smith Center (HSC), located in San Francisco, California, has emerged, which seeks to further inquiry into the relationship between spirituality and psychology. In addition, he is on the editorial board for both the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* and the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, including the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. Professor Smith has published many articles and has also contributed essays to a variety of anthologies edited by key authors of these fields.²

It is through the lens of the Perennial Philosophy, or through what has been termed “spiritual anthropology,” that Professor Huston Smith looks at modern psychology—in its behavioristic, psychoanalytic, humanistic, and transpersonal forms—in order to clarify various problem issues within the field.

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos: You are considered a doyen in the study of the world’s religions, having reflected on their doctrines and methods for the greater part of your life. This has brought you into contact with unsurpassed spiritual luminaries of the twentieth century, principally Frithjof Schuon³ and the other perennialist writers (i.e. Titus Burckhardt, Marco Pallis, Whitall

¹ Editor’s Note: This interview was conducted at Professor Huston Smith’s home in Berkeley, California on May 22 and June 19, 2010. The footnotes were compiled by the editor.

² See Huston Smith, “The Sacred Unconscious,” in *Beyond Health and Normality: Explorations of Exceptional Psychological Well-Being*, eds. Roger Walsh and Deane H. Shapiro (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1983), pp. 265-271; also of interest are “Psychology, Science, and Spiritual Paths: Contemporary Issues,” *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1978), pp. 93-111; “The Primordial Tradition,” in *Thinking Allowed: Conversations on the Leading Edge of Knowledge with Jeffrey Mishlove* (Tulsa, OK: Council Oak Books, 1992), pp. 92-96; “Foreword,” to Stanislav Grof, *The Ultimate Journey: Consciousness and the Mystery of Death* (Ben Lomond, CA: Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, 2006), pp. 11-12; “Foreword,” to Charles T. Tart, *The End of Materialism: How Evidence of the Paranormal is Bringing Science and Spirit Together* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009), pp. ix-xi.

³ “I discovered that he [Frithjof Schuon] situated the world’s religious traditions in a framework that enabled me to honor their significant differences unreservedly while at the same time seeing them as expressions of a truth that, because it was single, I could absolutely affirm. In a single stroke, I was handed a way of honoring the world’s diversity without falling prey to relativism, a resolution I had been seeking for more than thirty years” (David Ray Griffin and Huston Smith, *Primordial Truth and Postmodern Theology* [Albany, NY: State University of New

N. Perry, Martin Lings, Joseph Epes Brown, Seyyed Hossein Nasr,⁴ William Stoddart, etc.). Could you please speak to the significance that the Perennial Philosophy—or the Great Chain of Being—plays upon your *oeuvre*?

Huston Smith: In answer to your first question, the Perennial Philosophy (alternatively the Great Chain of Being) is central to my entire thought. If I were to find myself deviating from it I would catch myself up short and say “No, Huston you are on the wrong track!” because the Perennial Philosophy is where the world’s greatest thinkers speak in unison.

SBS: Modern psychology—behaviorism, psychoanalysis, humanistic psychology, and transpersonal psychology—is unable to deal adequately with the tripartite division of the human microcosm—Spirit/Intellect, soul, and body—which is not the case with the integral psychologies of the Perennial Philosophy. According to it, each spiritual tradition has a corresponding spiritual psychology. Could you please speak to the influence that the Perennial Philosophy has had upon modern psychology, most notably transpersonal psychology as well as humanistic psychology?

HS: I do not think of myself as a psychologist; I am a philosopher, but I will do what I can with your question. At the start of Western civilization these divisions among philosophy, psychology, and theology were not drawn. Take Plato’s *Dialogues*—what is it? Is it philosophy? Of course! Is it psychology? Yes! Is it theology without using that word? Certainly, for it refers reverently to the Divine! And it even includes politics, for as we know, Plato titles his entire corpus the *Republic*. Divisions in the seamless web of thought come later, mostly through academic departments in universities.

I am a supporter of transpersonal psychology, which affirms that there is more to the mind than textbook psychology includes. Still, we have to work with the fact that the original union which overlaps philosophy, psychology, theology has broken down, and we have to work with its pieces. I continue to think that all authentic traditions include a transpersonal concept of the human psyche.

The traditionalist or perennialist thesis is that modern psychology does not go far enough in the direction of recognizing the sanctity of things which underlies their normal everyday appearance to us, not differentiating between the apparent and the Real—the ego from the Self.

SBS: The five principal confusions which affect all four branches of modern psychology are scientism, evolutionism, psychologism, syncretism, and New Age thought. All of these viewpoints are reductionistic, and their effect is to remove or abolish the theomorphic nature of the human individual. They do this in the following ways: by reducing man to the five senses (scientism), by alleging that the greater can derive from the lesser (evolutionism), by equating the spiritual with the psychic (psychologism), by mixing truth with error (syncretism), and by accepting teachers and/or teachings that do not originate either in a spiritual revelation or

York Press, 1989], p. 13). There are also three significant video clips with Professor Huston Smith speaking about Frithjof Schuon—“Who is Frithjof Schuon?” “Discovering Schuon,” “Schuon’s Historical Context”—online via World Wisdom’s website: www.worldwisdom.com.

⁴ See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Homage to Huston Smith,” *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 5-8.

an authentic chain of spiritual transmission (New Age thought). According to the Perennial Philosophy, all of these five prejudices or presuppositions are largely or totally false. In your view, what are the principal confusions (or reductionisms) that affect all four branches of modern psychology?

HS: I would agree that five great barriers to an authentic psychology are scientism⁵—which validates what is real only by what our physical senses report—evolutionism⁶—which only affirms the material order by what is horizontal, in essence excluding the archetypes or the transcendent, that *the greater derives from the lesser*—psychologism—which dissociates the human psyche from its origin in Spirit—syncretism—which parodies synthesis by attempting to fuse what is most superficial without the essential principles to unite them, and “New Age” thought—which identifies or confuses the Absolute and the relative, arguing that we are already in our everyday experience immersed in the Absolute. New Age is cut-flower psychology; it does not root back into the Great Tradition or the Perennial Philosophy. And as we know cut-flowers are short lived.

SBS: In recent years the Perennial Philosophy has undergone heavy critique by key representatives within transpersonal psychology (i.e. Ken Wilber and Jorge N. Ferrer), challenging its central role and importance as one of the core tenets of the “fourth force” in modern psychology. There have also been attempts to usurp the Perennial Philosophy under an updated guise of modernism or postmodernism—what has been dubiously been termed the “The Neo-Perennial Philosophy” or “Integral-Post Metaphysics.” What are your thoughts on this curious development?

HS: That is their view, and I obviously disagree with it. With regards to Ken Wilber I just disagree with him; this may be close-minded of me but with all due respect to him, I do not think that he has the substance to stand up and critique the Perennial Philosophy.⁷

SBS: How do you envision the Perennial Philosophy assisting modern psychology and its two later currents—humanistic and transpersonal psychology—in bringing about an authentic psychology that addresses the fullness of the human individual—Spirit, soul, and body *in divinis*?

HS: In my book, *Tales of Wonder*, the Appendix contains “A Universal Grammar of Worldviews.” I think of this Appendix as a synonym for the Perennial Philosophy. The thesis is that any adequate psychology needs (in whatever wording), to include these fourteen points [presented in summarized form].

⁵ See Huston Smith, “Scientism: The Bedrock of the Modern Worldview,” in *Science and the Myth of Progress*, ed. Mehrdad M. Zarandi (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), pp. 233-248; “The Tunnel’s Floor: Scientism,” in *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 59-78.

⁶ See Huston Smith, “Changing the Shibboleth of Evolution,” *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2010), pp. 7-8.

⁷ Editor’s Note: For a critique of Ken Wilber, see José Segura, “On Ken Wilber’s Integration of Science and Religion” and John Herlihy’s review of Wilber’s *Integral Psychology* (both in this volume); for a critique of Jorge Ferrer, see Nahuel Sugobono’s review of Ferrer’s *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory* (in this volume).

1. Reality is infinite.
2. The Infinite includes the finite or we would be left with infinite-plus-finitude and the Infinite would not be what it claims to be.
3. The contents of finitude are hierarchically ordered.
4. Causation is from the top down, from the Infinite down through the descending degrees of reality.
5. In descending to the finite, the singularity of the Infinite splays out into multiplicity.
6. Reversing the drift of downward causation, as we look upward from our position on the causal chain we find that these virtues ascend the causal ladder, and as they ascend, their distinctions fade and they begin to merge.
7. When the virtues converge at the top of the pyramid, the inbuilt worldview makes its most staggering claim: absolute perfection reigns.
8. The Great Chain of Being, with its links that increase in worth as they ascend, needs to be qualified by the Hermetic Principle: "As above, so below." Everything "out there" is within us with the hierarchy inverted. When a mountain is reflected in a lake, its peak appears below its base.
9. Human beings cannot fully know the Infinite.
10. When articulated, as in the Bible, the Koran, the Upanishads, and the dialogues of Plato, the universal grammars have to be interpreted.
11. All these factors were taken for granted until the rise of twentieth-century fundamentalism with its obsession for taking language literally.
12. There are two distinct and complementary ways of knowing: the rational and the intuitive.
13. Walnuts have shells that house kernels, and religions likewise have outsides and insides.
14. Finally, what we know is ringed about with darkness.

All of the authentic enduring philosophies, psychologies, theologies have these fourteen points, so it is as if I have passed a strainer through the history of philosophy, psychology, theology and lifted out the common elements. I think that any psychology to be true— will have to coincide, include, incorporate these fourteen points. Now that is a very, very strong claim.

I am very happy that you are engaged in this project and I think that it can help to clear the atmosphere which is now very vague, confused, and cloudy. I honor and I am happy with the project.

SBS: Can modern psychology offer anything that is not already implicit within the perennial psychologies? If the question were put the other way around, one could suggest that not only do the perennial psychologies provide all that is necessary in a true psychology of the human individual but they are the only psychologies that are divinely sanctioned to provide a doctrine and method of transcending and integrating the empirical ego in what is higher than itself, which modern psychology is not and cannot be. One could also propose that if it were not for the phenomena of the Enlightenment in the West, there would have been no formation of modern psychology altogether as psychology would be part and parcel of religion or the spiritual domain as is the case with the Eastern spiritual traditions, not to mention the Shamanic traditions of the First Peoples. A follow up to this question, can therapy be of use to a sincere seeker that is committed and practicing an authentic spiritual tradition which addresses Spirit, soul, and body? And if so, how?

HS: I would start by confirming that modern psychology cannot offer anything authentically new to the perennial psychologies. Regarding the second part of your question, I would say yes. We get into glitches and we need assistance from professionals to help us understand and work our way through them. However it is important to note that psychology—or therapy—is not a replacement for the spiritual practices prescribed by the world’s religions.