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ESOTERICISM AND THE ESSENTIALIST ASSUMPTION

It is an assumption among some esotericists that a Platonic-Aristotelian doctrine of essences is an important, even necessary part of esotericism (1). I believe that this essentialist assumption is false: what is perennial is the desire to understand, not an essentialist interpretation of understanding; and what is esoteric is wisdom, not an essentialist account of wisdom. Contrary to a reductionist reading of nonessentialist philosophies (Isenberg and Thursby), I argue that the approaches of thinkers such as Wittgenstein and Richard Rorty are not only compatible with some important esotericist ideas—such as the notion that hidden beneath exoteric differences there lies a similarity in the various religious traditions—but that they also in some ways can provide a better understanding of what students of religion are doing when they are engaged in discussing esotericist and perennialist topics. I suggest that a nonessentialist interpretation of the “allegory of the cave” can illustrate the process of coming to adopt a religious version of Rorty’s “ironism”. I conclude with a brief example of a nonessentialist interpretation of some familiar religious ideas.

For the purposes of this essay, I will understand “esotericism” in religious traditions as the idea that in addition to the readily available exoteric or “outer” teachings known by the multitude, there is a less accessible esoteric or “inner” knowledge which is usually possessed by only a few people. “Esoterism is reserved”, Schuon tells us, “by definition and because of its very nature, for an intellectual elite necessarily restricted in numbers” (33). The kind of knowledge attained is variously described as “perennial” (Huxley), “primordial” (Schuon) or “traditional” (Nasr), depending on the author’s particular interests. Although Huston Smith believes esoteric knowledge does “not appeal to experience at all” (1987:554), such knowledge is usually thought of as experiential in the sense of being “direct and not discursive” and thereby going “infinitely further than reasoning” (Schuon xxx). Huxley adds the observation that “professional men of letters” usually lack this knowledge since it can be apprehended only by those
who have made themselves “loving, pure in heart, and poor in spirit” (viii). But it is generally agreed that esoteric knowledge is “metaphysical” in some recognizably Platonic sense, a kind of knowing, Schuon says, “which proceeds wholly from intellectual intuition” (xxx) and which brings with it “absolute certainty” (xxxiii), grounded in the unity of knower and known (xxx). Schuon believes that perhaps the most important doctrine which this metaphysical knowing reveals is the idea of degrees of being which are paralleled by degrees of knowing (38). In the West, as Smith observes, “Plato forged the paradigm” for this conception (1984:xvii). From this essentialist perspective, contemporary philosophies appear “monstrous” and even to be a kind of “misosophy” (Nasr 43).

In the Phaedo Socrates tells us that when he gave up trying to find explanations in terms of value and purpose in purely physical investigations he turned to the logoi (99e) or, as Gadamer translates it, our “ways of saying things” (1986:15). Attending to the logoi discloses the ideas or forms of equality, beauty, goodness (75d), health, tallness (64d), etc. Unlike their changing instances, the forms are unchanging (78d), invisible and apprehended only by reason (dianoia; 79a). To know the form of something is to be able to give an account of its essence (logos ousias) [Republic 534b]. As Gadamer has shown, Plato – faced with the example of Socrates’ extraordinary steadfastness in a time of moral confusion – thought that in the doctrine of forms he had found a stable basis for the moral life which would withstand the new phenomenon of sophistry: “The hypothesis of the eidos is the defense against the newly developed art of blind eristic argument” (1980:35). Moreover, in distinguishing between the noetic and the sensible, Plato was able “to provide the Pythagoreans with an appropriate understanding of their own mathematics” (1980:32). In the “divided line” of the Republic this distinction also allowed Plato to describe levels of knowing and certainty corresponding to levels of reality, culminating in an understanding (2) (noesis 511d) of the idea of the good, “the greatest thing to learn” (megiston mathema; 505a) (3).

In the Investigations Wittgenstein said of his Tractarian period that “a picture held us captive” (Σ 115). It is useful to note the similarity between this notion and Gadamer’s idea of “the tyranny of hidden prejudices” (1986b:239). Prejudices are a part of the structure of understanding. Contrary to “the fundamental prejudice of the enlightenment” (239), prejudices can be of either positive or negative value. The process of determining which prejudices are productive and which a hindrance to understanding is as endless as the process of understanding itself (265). In the light of these comments I want to isolate two misleading “pictures” or “prejudices” which lie behind Plato’s account of the ideas: the naming theory of meaning and the perceiving (especially, seeing) model of knowing and certainty.
According to the *Tractatus*, “a name means an object. The object is its meaning” (3.203) (4). As Berkeley noted in his Introduction to the *Principles* (Σ 18), language itself suggests to us that just as there are people and things which correspond to our names for them and which constitute the meaning of our names, so also there must be entities corresponding to general terms such as equality, goodness, beauty, justice, and so on – only these things are immaterial and changeless and perceivable only by the soul. Gamader states Plato’s thinking as follows: “Whenever we use words we are envisioning the inner aspect of a thing... beyond the sense-perceived. We are, so to speak, already ‘intending’ something else, the pure genus, the pure meaning” (1980:207). In his critique of this idea in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein points out that such a theory presupposes that naming “is preparatory to the use of a word” (Σ 26), whereas in fact using words comes first. Giving the name of the king in chess, for instance, doesn’t tell anyone anything “unless he already knows the rules of the game up until this last point” (Σ 30) and knows what “a piece in a game is” (Σ 31).

To be sure, in the *Cratylus* Plato – who wanted to avoid the methods of the sophists – denies that his notion of reality is dependent on names, apparently thinking that the truth is attained by pure unaided thought:

*How real existence is to be studied or discovered is, I suspect, beyond you and me. But we may admit so much, that the knowledge of things is not to be derived from names. No, they must be studied and investigated in themselves.* (1961:439b)

This notion of learning of real existence (τα οντα) not from names (ἐξ ονομάτων) but from the things themselves (ἐξ αὐτῶν) resembles in content and motivation Berkeley’s proposal in the *Principles* that “whatever ideas I consider, I shall endeavor to take them bare and naked into my view” (Σ 22) (5). Berkeley was mindful that “words are so apt to impose on the understanding” (Σ 21), and in Plato’s time “the domination of... [the Greek language] over thought was so great that the chief concern of philosophy was to free itself from it” (Gadamer 1986b:378). Of course, neither Plato nor Berkeley explain what a nonlinguistic attending to ideas would be; in fact, Plato’s method of dialectic with its turn to the λογοί is clearly as linguistic as was Berkeley’s endeavor. And even though Plato says that “when the mind is thinking, it is simply talking to itself” (*Theaetetus*, 1961:190), he in effect must maintain that this silent “talking” is actually not linguistic, with the ironical result, as Gadamer observes, that his “discovery of the ideas conceals the true nature of language even more than the theories of the sophists” (1986b). All of which is simply to show how deeply hidden (and tyrannous) the prejudice of naming is in essentialism.

The second essentialist “picture” or prejudice is to model knowing on perceiving. In Plato, one of the motivations for having immutable forms at all is to have something to “see” intellectually, thus properly founding our
knowledge and rendering it certain in the face of sophistical reasoning and moral confusion. In the Republic the soul, in its trying to know under different conditions, is compared by Plato to the effort to see during the day and during the night.

When it is firmly fixed on the domain where truth and reality shine resplendent it apprehends and knows them and appears to possess reason, but when it inclines to that region which is mingled with darkness, the world of becoming and passing away, it opines only and its edge is blunted, and it shifts its opinions hither and thither, and again seems as if it lacked reason. (1961:508d)

Wittgenstein made this remark about such a picture of knowing.

"I know" has a primitive meaning similar to and related to I see ("wissen", "videre"). And "I knew he was in the room, but he wasn't in the room" is like "I saw him in the room, but he wasn't there". "I know" is supposed to express a relation, not between me and the sense of a proposition (like "I believe") but between me and a fact. So that the fact is taken into my consciousness... This would give us a picture of knowing as the perception of an outer event through visual rays which project it as it is into the eye and the consciousness. Only then the question at once arises whether one can be certain of this projection. (1969d: Σ 90)

Now the association of knowledge with perception is unobjectionable insofar as it merely conveys a sense of directness as opposed, for instance, to hearsay. Of course, we usually reckon that perception can be a basis for knowing: "I know what he said because I heard him myself." (6) But if a sceptic is prepared to doubt that any perception discloses the existence of physical objects, there is nothing to appeal to that is more certain than the disputed perceptual situation. In the religious life, similarly, it is understood among believers that religious experience can disclose religious realities. Indeed, unless one has had at least some taste of the experience that is valued by the particular tradition or teaching, one is in the regrettable situation of living one's spiritual life very much in a second-hand fashion, so to say. Yet if a sceptic is prepared to doubt the veridical nature of any religious experience, there is again nothing to appeal to that is more certain than the contested experience and the place of the religious vocabulary in one's life. And when knowledge generally is modeled on perception, one ends up with the somewhat anomalous situation of knowledge without noncircular evidence — in effect, "I know it because I know it". Thus Plato thought he could know/perceive the forms; and G. E. Moore — in his "Proof of an External World" — thought he could know/perceive that "here is one hand... and here is another" (144). Plato's position came to grief in part because it is less certain that there are forms than there are things which they are supposed to explain. And Moore's certainties go begging for items which are more certain than they and which could be cited as reasons for thinking that
they are known (for we can be both certain and mistaken). Of course, Wittgenstein isn’t saying that we are unable to make statements that look like reasons, only that “if I tried I could give a thousand, but none as certain as the very thing they were supposed to be grounds for” (1969: Σ 307). What we regard as knowledge typically presupposes a multitude of mundane certainties that themselves have no proof but rather form the bases of proofs; and when a claim to knowledge is challenged, these unproven certainties can be appealed to in defense of the claim. This is so in regard to ordinary knowledge of physical objects as well as in regard to religious and moral knowledge. Therefore,

when Moore says he knows such and such, he is really enumerating a lot of empirical propositions which we affirm without special testing; propositions, that is, which have a peculiar role in the system of our empirical propositions. (1969: Σ 136)

Such certainties – my name is N.N.; I have never been to the moon; my body has never disappeared and reappeared again – are learned and are a core part of our knowledge. But unlike in the case of more ordinary propositions, to doubt them throws whole systems of propositions into doubt. To describe this kind of certainty Wittgenstein used the analogy of a riverbed:

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.

The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the riverbed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the riverbed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division between the two. (1969: Σ 96-97)

Suppose then that a mystic says that he possesses an esoteric knowledge of the unity of reality consisting of an “intellectual intuition” which gives “absolute certainty”. Insofar as this assertion is thought to be a reply to skeptics, it is much like Plato’s saying he knows/perceives the forms and Moore’s saying he knows that “here is one hand” and “here is another”. That is, the mystic, like Moore, can speak in a manner that looks like giving the skeptic reasons for thinking that his view of reality is correct, but in fact he will be unable to make noncircular statements which determined sceptics would count as giving “good reasons” for thinking as he does. Moreover, whereas we all will agree that Moore had two hands, there are very many who doubt that the mystic’s beliefs are any more true than childhood dreams of fairy dust. Furthermore, mystical intuitions are variously articulated at various times, showing that there is, as a matter of fact, simply no “absolute certainty” to be had in terms of a nonhistorically-conditioned statement of one’s understanding that will remain utterly constant within one’s own tradition, much less across traditions. Thus, however cer-
tain the mystic may be, his claim is not a matter of something that counts as "knowledge" within the context of skeptical doubt.

I believe the nonessentialist critique is basically correct: knowledge is not a matter of an ahistorical and somewhat mathematical perceiving of essences. And while it is true that we all have a host of certainties – some of which are religious – none of them can be described as knowledge within the context of skeptical doubt. Amongst our religious beliefs there happen to be certainties which are of an esoteric, mystical nature and which typically are available only to initiates or to those who have practiced certain disciplines (which has the same effect as secrecy since the desired states are usually not attained by the more ordinary religious folk). But these certainties and their esoteric language games – just like the other certainties and their language games – are not founded on seeing essences, and they thus lack any metaphysical anchor which might provide a foundation for their truth and secure their absolute, ahistorical certainty for us.

There is, to be sure, a sense in which those who share the mystic's perspective can be said to think that the mystic knows certain esoteric truths. It is commonplace for spiritual teachers and their initiates to believe that the teacher has had direct experience of religious realities which the initiate only aspires to knowing. Thus while the Shaikh Ahmad al-Alawi could describe in some detail the various levels of attainment that his own shaikh’s instruction allowed him and others to experience (Lings 54-55), this didn’t prevent al-Alawi’s French physician from being a nonbeliever. The shaikh could only reply: “It is a pity that you will not let your Spirit rise above yourself. But whatever you may say and whatever you may imagine, you are nearer to God than you think.” (29) It is true that religious experience has a conceptual element and, within limits, it can be articulated and discussed. Nonetheless, those who do not share the mystic’s religious vocabulary will not agree that the relevant teachings are in fact known: he will say that the adept has false beliefs or, if they are true, they aren’t known to be true. For believers, it is more perspicacious and productive to point out that a person who believes in physical objects is, logically speaking, not in a very different position from one who believes in religious truths. Thus Quine once observed that, while he believed in physical objects but not the Homeric gods, “in point of epistemological footing the physical objects and the gods differ only in degree and not in kind” (44). This nicely illustrates that our “common sense” (Moore) is in fact historically conditioned (Gadamer), for a Pythagorean or Orphic initiate would think that the notion of the god Apollo is just fine for, in Quine’s words, “working a manageable structure into our experience” (44).

From a Wittgensteinian perspective, the important point is that once the relevant vocabulary is accepted, plenty of reasons can be given, but they are all of a circular nature. As there are no essences, there is no noncircular
proof of the truth of these esoteric languages of unity. But this is a general characteristic of language games and not something peculiar to the vocabularies of esotericists. It follows that demands such as those of Steven Katz (1978:65.22) for noncircularity and independent grounds are simply wrong-headed. This is like a person without a sense of humor asking for independent grounds showing why a joke is funny. To the degree that would-be candidates for such grounds are independent, to that degree they are also not humorous. Mindful of Wittgenstein's warning that philosophical confusions arise when language is idling and not in use (1958: Σ 132), if we want to understand what a mystic is saying and why, it is much more enlightening to ask what sort of "work" his vocabulary is doing. The inquirer may or may not be moved by the mystic's testimony, but if he is moved he is being persuaded to change his form of life. When discussing whole vocabularies, as Rorty has noted, criteria for proof are absent, with the result that the opponent can't be driven "up against an argumentative wall" (1989a:53). What Rorty says about political positions is very much applicable to mystical viewpoints. Concerning the former, he says that questions about how do you know should be brushed aside

in the same way as we brush aside questions like "How do you know that Jones is worthy of your friendship...?" We should see allegiance to social institutions as no more matters for justification by reference to familiar, commonly accepted premises – but also no more arbitrary – than choices of friends or heroes. (1989:54) (7)

If the essentialist assumption is dropped, then what Rorty in his recent work calls "ironism" has much to recommend it to students of esotericism. Of course, there is a great deal in Rorty that is nonreligious: he speaks, for instance, of the "de-divinization" of our culture and defends a viewpoint that, ideally, is "secular, through and through" (1989a:45). He even goes so far as to say that "to be thoroughly Wittgensteinian in our approach to language, would be to de-devinize the world" (1989a:21, whereas Wittgenstein himself retained a deep sense of "the mystical" in life (8). Moreover, the more important elements of his notion of irony clearly do not entail secularism. Before defining his idea of the ironist, Rorty introduces the idea of a "final vocabulary", which is "the words in which we tell the story of our lives" (1989a:73). It is final in the sense that "the user has no noncircular argumentative recourse" if doubt is cast on it (73). He goes on to define the "ironist" as one who fulfills the following three conditions:

1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies [...] taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situa-
tion, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. (1989a:73)

Students of religion might want to think of a final vocabulary as the language in which one's "ultimate concerns" are articulated; naturally, such concerns could be esoteric and perennial. Except for the third, nonreligious condition, many students of religion could recognize the position of the ironist as similar to their own. Rorty says that the ironist "spends her time worrying that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game" (75). While this may somewhat overstate the case, such an experience is by no means unusual for those who have begun to appreciate the varieties of religious conceptual schemes (9), while being dismayed at the intolerance and violence that often – one fears that one could almost say necessarily – accompanies being possessed of (by?) religious certainties. What the religious ironist or nonessentialist discovers is that it is impossible to imagine – for one who philosophizes – living honestly without the at least occasional discomfort of conceptual uncertainty and a continuing distrust of systematic certainties. In other words, the nonessentialist has no scriptures in the sense of a literature that is exempt from historical contingency and closed to the ineluctable and endless process of reconceptualization. This at least has the irenic result of making the nonessentialist open to the variety of final vocabularies that exist.

It may well be that this doctrinally impoverished condition – this lack of "theology" as it has been known in the West – is not such a bad thing. Perhaps at its deepest stages it is something that we can even hope for in the development of religious understanding, for surely it is hard to deny that all too often religions have in fact fostered the very attachment to self, enlargement of ego, and injury to human life which they claim to oppose. In Rorty's case, ironism is coupled with an ethical concern to avoid cruelty and the causing of pain (10), and there is a parallel to this in religious reflection, i.e., the desire to avoid intolerance and the infliction of suffering on people, especially if that harm is given a religious justification. It must be emphasized that in this case, however, a tolerance that leaves the barriers still standing – as important as that is politically – is insufficient from a religiously "liberal" point of view. Unlike the situation of our attitude toward other languages where "charity" is forced upon us if we are to understand them at all (Davidson 197), in the religious arena it often seems that charity is taken as a kind of cowardice – a lack of the courage to be really intolerant, the latter evidencing certainty and being a mark of a superior understanding of religious truth. But if charity is a priority, then what is required is an irenic understanding which seeks to dissolve barriers through the creation of new vocabularies of harmony. Esotericists provide us with one clue for how to build harmony by showing hidden depths in differing traditions. Perennialists provide another clue by discovering similarities in those depths. But
the languages of unity themselves – the vocabularies that will unite the many – are not simply there in the traditions to be discovered. They must be created, and this creation will have to be done over and over again, for as historical situations vary, so the bridge vocabularies that help people come together must also vary. Indeed, one wonders if the very idea of “separation” and nonunity is itself not in some sad way a destructive illusion which has religions themselves in its tightest and most dogmatic grip. Even our impressive esoteric houses of words might also sometimes function as temples of the ego which are dedicated to separation and which promote a subtle preoccupation with self which is all the more insidious because of its apparent innocuousness: after all, what harm could there be in linguistic beings dwelling in a house of words, especially if those words are inspiring, elevating, and hoary with tradition?

It is perhaps illuminating to read Plato’s own allegory of the cave in a way which points us in a nonessentialist direction. If one sets aside Plato’s idea of the “forms” and stresses instead his interest in the inconclusiveness and dialogical nature of dialectic – especially in regard to the good and the beautiful, which bear little resemblance to ordinary universals and the idea of common elements (11) – one can begin to think of esoteric vocabularies as components of conversational processes of articulation which are in principle open-ended and inconclusive. Plato’s allegory can then be read as an account of the loss of the prejudice of preeminence whereby certain conceptual schemes and traditions – whether it be Sioux, Islamic, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, or whatever – are thought to be lifted out of our dialogical world and into a noncontingent realm beyond the process of conversation. When this prejudice is dropped, the person is freed of the “leaden weights [...] of our birth and becoming” and can experience a “conversion toward the things that are real and true” (1961:519b), i.e., on this reading, things that are not only open to, but absolutely call for further discussion. And just as the “whole body” (518c) of the prisoner in the cave must be turned around when the theological prejudice is abandoned and a nonessentialist approach is adopted. Such a process is, of course, painful (516c), and on the present account, there is not even the security – which Plato at least appeared to have – of being able to discover some truths which are stable and unchanging in the sense that historically meaningful articulation is irrelevant to their understanding. For instance, if God is one, does this mean that it is wrong for people such as Black Elk to invoke the spirits of the six directions? If God is one, does the doctrine of wahdat al-wujud follow? If God is one, does this exclude the idea of the trinity? These notions have been and are now subject to continued discussion and debate.

The ecumenical benefits of a nonessentialist esotericism can be perhaps best be illustrated by taking an example which works with leading ideas from several traditions – in this case, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christia-
nity. I suggest that a useful final vocabulary might begin with the Tetra-
grammaton. "The Word of revelation is I am that I am. That which re-
veals is that which reveals. That which is is, and nothing more" (Buber
112) (12). This and the teaching of anatta can be interpreted as two aspects
of one reality, and the illuminating experience of this fact can be expressed in
al-Hallaj’s ana’ l-Haqq ("I am the Truth") together with the saying attribu-
ted to Jesus, “not what I will but what you will” (Mark 14:36). The combi-
nations to be considered then are: YHWH/anatta, and “I am the Tru-
th”/“not my will”. The key point of these four interrelated concepts may
be that in the presence of ultimate reality one’s self in the ordinary sense
quite simply does not matter: one’s opinions, position, and especially one’s
religious learning – theological, legal, liturgical, and spiritual – are of utterly
no account. What is, is. There is an eerie directionality about this, such
that on the one hand there is the truth, while on the other hand there is...
nothing – and we human beings – in our understanding – appear to be on
both sides of this paradox. Here is perhaps the primordial fact within
which everything else is determined and the primordial revelation within
which everything else is to be understood. In my view, such a truth is not
something that is generally appealing, and therefore it is for the most part
unsought: its realization is involuntary and in fact unwelcome from the
viewpoint of the ordinary self. To be sure, people do go on religious quests,
but when this truth comes upon them, it is not what was expected. The
appropriation of this truth – which is evidently more than a lifetime’s work
for the vast majority of us – is unrelentingly and pitilessly devastating to the
ego. Lest this be taken as moving in the direction of a “feeble sentimenta-
ility” (Nasr 1981:287) waxing exhuberant over God’s universal love, I would
like to propose further that this notion can be perhaps most clearly illustra-
ted in such negativities as the Nazi death camps and Jesus’ execution.

In a sense, it is a terrible truth that is under consideration here: one’s most
prized possession – the self and its elaborations, particularly its subtle reli-
gious development and achievements – is of no ultimate account, from an
egoic point of view. On the other hand, there seems to be a kind of para-
doxical monotheletic uplift in realizing the truth, such that when the self is
displaced (if not literally annihilated in fana), what remains is the egoically
unadorned truth: reality without the usual trappings of Gotama’s “three
roots” of greed, hatred, and delusion. I must add that I am taking this
primordial revelation to include also all of life’s beauties and joys – once
these are void of self, of course. But if the life of Gotama and the history of
Israel tell us anything, it is surely the melancholy fact that spiritual growth is
more often stimulated by the experience of dukkha than by happiness. The
careers of al-Hallaj, Suhrawardi, and Jesus, moreover, suggest that this dark-
ly ennobling truth has not been particularly well-received by the authorities.

From a nonessentialist point of view, “final vocabularies” – even those
including terms as sacred as those which I have just mentioned – are most emphatically not final in the sense of being complete: their lack of an essentialist foundation leaves them irremediably subject to questioning and change. The nonessentialist accepts this state of affairs. Although the essentialist is bound to find this situation to be a refusal of the kind of doctrinal commitment which religious experience should call forth, nonessentialists need not lack enthusiasm and energy. Consider, for instance, these lines from the fourteenth-century Turkish poet, Yunus Emre: “Anywhere I look, it’s filled with You./ Where can I put You if you are already inside?” (Emre 22). From the viewpoint of such a sentiment, it is as if there is no room for other confidences. Systems, sects, and denominations can come and go: “I’ve forgotten religion and piety./ What if there’s a doctrine deeper than religion?” (23) – a doctrine that didn’t have room for the ego of my faith? “My own ego abandoned me./ The Friend took everything I had” (24).

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NOTES

(1) Following Gadamer, I include Aristotle “as part of the eidos... philosophy that Plato established” (1986a:14).

(2) According to Gadamer, “real knowledge” in Plato corresponds to our “understanding” (1986a:26).

(3) Plato only uses idea, and never eidos, for the good. (Gadamer 1986a:27).

(4) Tractarian objects are not everyday objects but correspond more to Platonic ideas: “Objects are what is unalterable and subsistent; their configuration is what is changing and unstable” (2.0271).

(5) Naturally, these are Berkleyan “ideas”, which in some respects are the very opposite of Platonic forms and which can be the same things as “objects”. See Σ 22 of the Introduction to the Principles.

(6) Of course, in Greek the perfect of eido (oida) can mean both “I have seen” and “I know” – I know it since I have seen it.

(7) It follows that attempts by perennialists to refute Katz are really beside the point. Some people are simply more interested in noting differences than in creating unities. It is well for readers of Katz to heed his insistence that the roots of his thinking “are Kantian, not Wittgensteinian” (1988:757). His admittedly Kantian allegiance perhaps evidences a hidden Cartesian demand for methodological justification, which in turn illustrates what Gadamer calls “the fundamental prejudice of the enlightenment”, namely “the prejudice against prejudice itself” (1986:239 and 240).

(8) The reference, of course, is to the Tractatus (1961:6.44). This sense of the mystical was not lost in his later life. See M. O’C. Drury’s reminiscences in Rhees.

(9) Of course, by “conceptual schemes” and “vocabularies”, I am not referring to whole natural languages. As Donald Davidson has argued, it makes no sense to suppose that languages can be untranslatable, either in whole or in part.
It seems to me that the idea of an "untranslatable language" has no sense, for how would we know that what is untranslatable is language? If this is true, the difficulty here is a version of the Cartesian private language in Wittgenstein—a language "which only I myself can understand" (1958: Σ 256).

Rorty has pointed out, on the other hand, that specialized vocabularies can be so different that it is impossible to translate statements from one jargon into statements of another jargon (1989b:336). This is one reason why vocabularies of religious unity must be created and not simply discovered.

(10) Following Judith Sklar, Rorty defines liberals as "people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do" (1989a:xv).

(11) See Gadamer's essay on "Plato's Unwritten Dialectic" (1980). For Wittgenstein's remarks about "seeing what is common" (a phrase which itself in fact refers to a variety of things), see 1958: Σ 72-74. What is "in common" is determined by human interests and agreement. Dogs and cats have much in common, and if our inclinations were different we might call both dogs and cats by one name—"cogs", perhaps—but in fact we don't. Our not so doing has nothing to do with the universe's lacking the form of "coghood".

(12) Although I begin with YHWH, much the same result could be achieved by starting with a statement of the divine unity: "La ilaha illa 'Llah."

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