

Modes of *Askēsis*

ADAM ROBBERT
adam@thesideview.co

August 1, 2019

I've gathered together here a list of primary and secondary sources that in one way or another address the topic of *askēsis*. I have tried to be both wide-ranging and discerning with this sampling of texts, and while the French philosopher and historian Pierre Hadot is a central figure in this analysis, his work is also treated as a jumping off point for other dialogues. My aim is to paint for the reader a general scene, a landscape of qualities and attributes, that one might associate with ascetic practices.

Askēsis is a broad theme in the literature. The concept is found in the texts of ancient Greece, Christian monasticism, contemporary philosophy, and aesthetic theory, to say nothing of its presence in the world outside of Greek and European thought, so my treatment requires artificial limitation. I describe a few of these boundary conditions at the top of the essay, and then move on to describe the examples of ascetic practice I found most illuminating in philosophy, religion, and art. But first, I turn to the history of the word itself, so as to give the reader an initial orientation before exploring its deeper meaning.

Definitions and Boundary Conditions

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *askēsis* simply as a practice of self-discipline (from the Greek *ἄσκησις*, “exercise” or “training”), and lists examples including training the body, athletic exercise, training the senses, and communing with the divine.¹ Terms like *ascetic* and *ascetism* are also linked to notions of self-discipline but carry a greater emphasis on abstinence and austerity.² *Merriam-Webster’s* likewise notes the link between *askēsis* (or *ascesis*) and self-discipline, while also noting the emphasis on exercise, or *askein*, again suggesting an embodied or practical regime of training.³ The *Encyclopedia Britannica* offers another definition of *ascetism* (from the Greek *askēō*, for “exercising” or “training”), and links *askēsis* to pursuing an ideal state or end point, with a pronounced proficiency. This sense of *askēsis* referred first to athletic training, but later came to include mental, moral, or spiritual capability, the latter of which included Christian monastic practices of celibacy, the abdication of worldly possessions and needs, and fasting.⁴

The etymology suggests connections to *asketikos*, defined as “rigorously self-disciplined, laborious,” which is connected to *asketes*, “monk, hermit,” and “skilled worker, one who practice an art or trade,” as well as *askein* “to exercise, train” (with specific reference to athletic competition), but also “to fashion material, embellish or refine material.”⁵ These definitions share the understanding that *askēsis*, *ascetic*, *ascetism*, and *ascesis* form a constellation of terms that broadly derive from the Greek *ἄσκησις*, and so I

¹ *OED*, s.v. “askesis,” accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/11366?redirectedFrom=ask%C4%93sis#eid>

² *OED*, s.v. “ascetism,” accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/11370> and “ascetic,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/11367>

³ *Merriam-Webster’s*, s.v. “ascesis,” accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ascesis>

⁴ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “asceticism,” accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/asceticism>

⁵ *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “ascetic,” accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=ascetic>

treat them in this review as roughly cognate with one another. I thus take references to each term, especially when considered in context, as examples of *askēsis* and the practices that fall within its range. The discussion is also bounded in other ways.

Centrally, I focus on ascetic practice as found in the West, but as Sajjad Rizvi makes clear, examples of *askēsis* are not limited to the Greek, Hellenistic, Roman, Judaic, or Christian matrices that this essay orbits. For example, we find in the work of the Islamic philosopher Mullā Sadrā (d. 1635) instances of philosophical *askēsis* and an account of philosophy as a way of life similar to Hadot's own reading.⁶ Hadot himself was intrigued by the continuities and similarities between Western ascetic practices, both philosophical and religious, and Buddhist practices, to say nothing of Hadot's references to Indian and Chinese philosophy in general, which also exhibit their own modes of *askēsis*.⁷ There are ascetic practices world-wide. It is my own emphasis on Hadot that limits me to a subset of these practices, found within a certain geography and history.

I'll add as an additional point of orientation that I'm aware of the historical and conceptual ambiguity inherent to terms like philosophy, spirituality, and religion, and my aim is not to ignore these differences—Hadot for

⁶ Rizvi, "Approaching Islamic Philosophical Texts," 132–147.

⁷ Hadot sounds like a perennialist philosopher in discussing these overlaps and parallels when he writes, "Perhaps we should say that the choices of life we have described—those of Socrates, Pyrrho, Epicurus, the Stoics, the Cynics, and the Sceptics—correspond to constant, universal modes which are found, in various forms, in every civilization, throughout the various culture zones of humanity" (*What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 278). It would follow, then, that any number of Indigenous or shamanic practices would fall within this circle, but Hadot, unlike his contemporary Mircea Eliade, is quite skeptical of this connection (*ibid.*, 181–186). I tend to agree with Hadot when he appeals to the specificity of concrete practices as one factor that separates Greek from shamanic practice—the other is the Greek emphasis on the rational control of the soul—but then I have to ask, Why draw such attention to the specificity of practice between the Greek and the shamanic, but not the Greek and the Buddhist (or the Confucian, etc.)? A kind interpretation here would suggest that Hadot is merely being careful and specific. The harsher, but perhaps more realistic, view is that Hadot makes too much of the difference between ancient Greek and Indigenous traditions, even if he does allow for what seems to be a through line between shamanic technique and ritual practice in archaic Greece (*ibid.*, 185). In any case, a comparative project of ascetic practice in the context of Indigenous or shamanic traditions is a worthwhile endeavor that I cannot pick up here.

example positions philosophy itself as a kind of spiritual exercise,⁸ and of course the distinction between philosophy and religion did not exist for the ancient Greeks in the way that it does for modern scholars⁹—but untangling this history is the work of another project.

My aim is simply to track examples of *askēsis* where I find them, in philosophy, spirituality, religion, art, athletics, and so on, rather than to offer a genealogy of the categories within which these practices are placed. In this context, the theologian Thomas Merton offers a helpful description of asceticism, which speaks to its broad applicability across domains. He writes, “It [ascetism] comes from the Greek *askein*: to adorn, to prepare by labor, to make someone adept by exercises. (Homer uses it for ‘making a work of art.’) It was applied to physical culture, moral culture, and finally religious training. It means, in short, training—spiritual training.”¹⁰

I take *askēsis*, then, to refer broadly to exercises that are variously athletic, philosophical, artistic, cultural, scientific, or moral in nature. That *askēsis* means both to labor and to adorn, to borrow Merton’s phrasing, is indicative of the subtle possibilities implied by ascetic exercise: To practice is to work, and through work, to make more elaborate, perhaps specifically to make one’s own experience more elaborate, or nuanced, in a certain direction governed by the telos of practice. As Patricia Dailey observes, ascetic practices across history have been concerned with the development of the inner and outer senses, in other words, with the development of perceptual ability, seen both as the introspective quality of attention to oneself and as the refinement of the body’s senses.¹¹

Further, with Hadot’s work it’s important to underscore once more, placing the varieties of *askēsis* to one side for the moment, that he viewed *askēsis* as a spiritual exercise, and that philosophy for him was always linked to a

⁸ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*

⁹ For more on this discussion, see Talal Asad’s *Genealogies of Religion*.

¹⁰ Merton, *A Course in Christian Mysticism*, 4.

¹¹ Daily, “The Body and Its Senses,” 264–276.

way of life.¹² It is within this context that *askēsis* is best understood, that is, as a practice which complicates the boundaries between philosophy, spirituality, and life in the world as a whole. The Greco-Roman and Christian practices to which Hadot dedicated his life to recovering were essentially spiritual practices and ways of being. As Michael Chase, Hadot's student and translator, puts it,

These exercises, involving not just intellect or reason, but all of a human being's faculties, including emotion and imagination, had the same goal as all ancient philosophy: reducing human suffering and increasing happiness, by teaching people to detach themselves from their particular, egocentric, individualistic viewpoints and become aware of their belonging, as integral component parts, to the Whole constituted by the entire cosmos.¹³

These ancient philosophical exercises, Chase informs us, were less about producing systematic theoretical constructs, though they did so as an effect of practice, than they were about the practical aim of transforming the being and perception of the philosopher.¹⁴ If there is then one general definition of *askēsis* that I can offer to the reader here at the outset, it is this, *askēsis* is a spiritual exercise that results in a transformation of perception through the cultivation of a certain mode of being.

Hadot throughout his work describes any number of philosophical exercises that justly qualify as examples of *askēsis* in the general sense defined above. However, I have limited the examples given in this review to places where Hadot explicitly links a philosophical exercise to either *askēsis* or a form of ascetism by name. In a certain sense, almost every type of philosophical activity, if approached in a practical way, could be defined as a species of *askēsis*, and as Hadot notes, *askēsis* is not limited to this or that school of philosophy. "Almost all schools," Hadot informs us, "advocated the practice

¹² See Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* and *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.

¹³ Chase, "Introduction," 3.

¹⁴ Chase, "Observations," 263.

of *askēsis* (a Greek word meaning ‘exercise’) and self-mastery.”¹⁵ Limiting the discussion to these terms, then, is one way of placing a boundary around the uses of *askēsis* that one might consider in a review of this kind.

Finally, my attempt to give a comprehensive account of the types of possible *askēsis* is also complicated by the fact that the exercises one could count as ascetic in nature are never listed in the historical literature in an encyclopedic way. In fact, Hadot is of the opinion that many ascetic exercises were transmitted as part of an oral curriculum, making their recreation here an interpretive affair. I quote Hadot, “Although many texts allude to them, there is no systematic treatise which exhaustively codifies the theory and technique of philosophical exercises (*askēsis*).”¹⁶

This complication makes an accurate historical reproduction difficult to perform, but it also foregrounds an essential quality of ascetic practice; namely, that ascetic practice is not primarily a discursive or literary affair, even if, as I’ll describe below, there are ascetic practices related to reading and writing. It is instead much more often an embodied and practical activity, a type of action not readily transmitted in the medium of text but one that requires engaging in the world, through diet, meditation, art, exercise, dialogue, physical training, and so on.

The difficulty of recovering the details of these oral instructions aside, Hadot nonetheless tries to articulate a few root commonalities that tie together various notions of philosophical exercise. On the array of existing practices, Hadot writes,

We will see that they ultimately can be reduced to two movements, opposed but complimentary, in the acquisition of self-consciousness: one of concentration of the self, and the other of expansion of the self. What unified these practices was their striving for a single ideal: the figure of the sage, who,

¹⁵ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 189.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 188.

despite apparent differences, was conceived by the various schools as having many common features.¹⁷

It is within this larger framework of concentration and expansion of the self that I situate Hadot's account of *askēsis*, though as I've already alluded to, *askēsis* includes practices outside of philosophy proper. All of this is to say that a family resemblance of techniques can be found, both among philosophical traditions and between philosophy and other disciplines, like art, religion, and athletics. I turn now to these disciplines.

Philosophy and *Askēsis*

Hadot's historical work includes treatments of pre-Socratic philosophy, Platonism and Aristotelianism, the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the Middle Ages, and the modern era. I have selected only a handful of examples from these periods in order to give the reader a sense for the varieties of ascetic practice present within each tradition, and to show how these practices tend to transform from one period to another, often adopting a new set of metaphysical commitments in so doing. Where relevant I draw on other philosophers and historians to add detail to Hadot's account of *askēsis* and its instantiations.

Pierre Hadot: Philosophy as a Way of Life

I start by noting that *askēsis* is not only a type of philosophical exercise, but is in many ways a precondition for thinking and living philosophically. Hadot for example cites the Stoic Musonius Rufus as one place where *askēsis* is an explicit, even prerequisite, element for living a philosophical life.¹⁸ *Askēsis* in this context has a specific relationship to the examination of the representations that govern our actions, and here the notion of exercise applies to body and soul. Ascetic training is in this way linked to athletic training. As I relayed earlier, it's a kind of exercise engaged in for self-transformation. "Exercises of body and soul thus combined to shape the

¹⁷ Ibid., 189.

¹⁸ Ibid., 188–189.

true person: free, strong, and independent,” is how Hadot puts it.¹⁹ *Askēsis* is just this kind of repetitive training.

This is a point of emphasis that Hadot shares with Michael McGhee, who likewise suggests that a program of *askēsis* is required before one can perform any analysis into the ordering and construction of thought, experience, or being. McGhee argues that prior to philosophical activity there is “a certain quality of receptive attention that needs to be cultivated first”²⁰ and that this mode of attention generates “the interior conditions upon which doing philosophy may turn out to depend.”²¹

In one sense, then, philosophy requires attention, but in another it requires a suspension of attention. McGhee writes, “We need to learn how to *suspend* thought, and then to see what emerges out of this silence.”²² And what is it that emerges out of this silence? What emerges on McGhee’s account is something like the possibility for understanding the conditions that shape feeling, thought, and experience. McGhee writes,

You are not looking in philosophy for correct but unrevealing definitions, but for illumination of the field of sense, increases in understanding, the sight of what was formerly concealed from view. The shape of an expression’s magnetic field shines for a few moments, then disappears again. The task of the philosopher is to trace the pattern that reveals itself only for moments and then slips from sight.²³

McGhee’s emphasis on suspension calls to mind the *epoché* (ἐποχή), common to Greek Skepticism, which referred to a similar “suspension of

¹⁹ Ibid., 189.

²⁰ McGhee, *Transformations of Mind*, 10.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 20.

²³ Ibid., 9.

judgment.”²⁴ The phenomenologist Edmund Husserl also advocates for this kind of radical suspension in belief. I quote his writing on Descartes to demonstrate the necessity of the *epoché* as an initial maneuver, as an initial *askēsis* or entry point, into the philosophical life. Husserl writes,

It is essential that he [Descartes], and anyone who seriously seeks to be a philosopher, begin with a sort of *radical skeptical epoché* which places in question all his hitherto existing convictions, which forbids in advance any judgmental use of them, forbids taking any position as to their validity or invalidity. Once in his life every philosopher must proceed in this way; if he has not done it, and even already has “his philosophy,” he must still do it. Prior to the *epoché* “his philosophy” is to be treated like any other prejudice.²⁵

Husserl notes in this quote that the philosopher must practice *epoché* at least “once in his life,” but I think in terms of a philosophical *askēsis*, one should view *epoché* as a daily practice, or at least a common one; it’s more an ongoing exercise than a singular event. In any case, Husserl’s critical *epoché* is the jumping off point for all subsequent philosophizing, and it is following the execution of the *epoché*—and really I should speak here in the plural, as Husserl lists in the same text many kinds of *epoché*—where the illumination McGhee speaks of can begin.

By illuminating the field of sense and shining a light upon the patterns in perception that were formerly concealed from view, and thereby gaining perspective over the recurrent shapes of one’s own experience, one gains new abilities within perception. On this account, practical actions comport with the epistemic construction of experience, forming in the background the implicit reasons for acting the way one acts. In McGhee’s understanding, it is the perceptions and representations of what one takes to be the case that draws behavior in different directions.²⁶ In his words, “We are moved

²⁴ *OED*, s.v. “epoché,” accessed on July 31, 2019
<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/242750?redirectedFrom=epoche#eid>

²⁵ Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences*, 76.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

by facts or what we take to be facts.”²⁷ To be sure, the *epoché* is just one philosophical move—I would even say it’s a precursor to movement—and Hadot’s work is in many ways a catalogue of these moves.

For example, the notion of *askēsis* is also linked to Plotinus and to the Neoplatonists, where it is characterized by the “concrete practices and way of life”²⁸ that accompanies philosophical discourse. As Hadot notes of Plotinus, “life according to the Spirit consisted in a philosophical life—that is, in *askēsis* and moral and mystical experience.”²⁹ One forms a picture here of philosophy that is at once discursive (having to do with propositional statements, arguments, and definitions) but also, and perhaps more importantly, as involving types of practice, ways of life, and with *experiences* best characterized as mystical in nature. Hadot continues, “Plotinus’ philosophical discourse leads solely to an inner *askēsis* and experience which are true knowledge, and which enable the philosopher to rise toward the supreme reality by progressively attaining levels of self-consciousness that are ever higher and more inward.”³⁰

In the case of Platonic philosophy, Hadot links *askēsis* to the performance of dialectics, or the putting forth of a question or thesis that was then attacked by an interlocutor according to specific rules of engagement. “Training in dialectics was absolutely necessary,” Hadot says, “insofar as Plato’s disciples were destined to play a role in their city. In a civilization where political discourse was central, young people had to be trained to have a perfect mastery of speech and reason.”³¹ These rules of engagement were designed to pull the philosopher out of his or her personal point of view and into the larger arena of impersonal reason.

Crucially, Plato aimed not at producing students who could merely defend or attack just any position—this is what sets philosophy apart from rhetoric

²⁷ Ibid., 33.

²⁸ Ibid., 170.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 163.

³¹ Ibid., 62.

or sophistry—but more precisely to align his students with a spiritually committed life. Hadot continues, “That is why Platonic dialectics was not a purely logical exercise. Instead, it was a spiritual exercise which demanded that interlocutors undergo an *askēsis*, or self-transformation.”³² Platonic dialectics is in this sense a dialogue engaged in for the sake of reaching beyond one’s own point of view, a striving to join the expanded view of the cosmic logos, constellated specifically within the affective space of friendship, a relationship that would encourage transcendence of one’s personal point of view.³³

Hadot again picks up the theme of Platonic *askēsis* in reference to *Phaedo*, where the physical death of Socrates is recounted, and in the *Symposium*, where Hadot identifies Socrates as engaging in a different practice of death (*meleté thanatou*), likely preparing Socrates for the mortal death detailed in *Phaedo*.³⁴ These death practices are key modes of *askēsis* in the Platonic tradition. In fact, “The most famous practice is the exercise of death,” Hadot tells us.³⁵ Clearly, such a practice can take many forms. In *Phaedo*, it shows itself as the life of practice that readies one for the death of the body; in the *Symposium*, it shows itself in the scene of Socrates standing in meditation, reflecting on himself, abstaining from food or movement. On this scene Hadot writes, “This exercise was, indissolubly, an *askēsis* of the body and of thought—a divestment of the passions in order to accede to the purity of intelligence.”³⁶

Hadot’s discussion of *meleté thanatou* continues with examples from the *Republic* (wherein the soul is described as stretching itself upward to the divine), in the “glance from above” of the philosopher in the *Theaetetus*, and in the beholding of eternal beauty in the *Symposium*, of which Hadot writes,

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 63.

³⁴ Ibid., 67

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 67.

This vision is analogous to that enjoyed by people initiated into the mysteries of Eleusis; it transcends all enunciation and discursivity, but engenders virtue in the soul. Philosophy then becomes the lived experience of a presence. From the experience of the presence of a beloved being, we rise to the experience of a transcendent presence.³⁷

The practice of death—as death of the body, divestment of the passions, ascent to the divine, or the beholding of eternal beauty—decenters the individual person in favor of the kind of concentrated or expanded self Hadot argues is central to practices of *askēsis* as such. Especially interesting here is the notion that a vision—an aesthetic experience—can configure or “engender” a kind of virtue in the soul. (I will return to the idea that aesthetic *askēsis* can transfigure the self later in the essay.)

These practices are also similar to the ascetic exercises found in the works of the Neoplatonist Porphyry, who argued for the importance of an austere relation to the body, the senses, and the passions. “Such asceticism was intended, above all,” Hadot writes, “to stop the lower part of the soul from diverting toward itself the attention which should be oriented toward the spirit.”³⁸ This was not an asceticism practiced for its own sake, but a strategy for cultivating and developing attention. This according to Hadot’s account was a value and a discipline shared in various ways by the likes of Aristotle, Plotinus, and the Stoics.

Contemplative attention trained through ascetic practice was a strategy these philosophers used to regain awareness of their true, transcendent selves—selves linked to a divine nature, in this case³⁹—but metaphysical commitments aside, Hadot also finds a similar structure of practice in for example Kant’s notion of the inner court. Hadot writes, “When the self is its own judge, it splits into an intelligible self (which imposes its own law on itself, viewing itself from a universal perspective) and a sensible, individual

³⁷ Ibid., 70.

³⁸ Ibid., 159.

³⁹ Ibid.

self. We thus encounter once again the split implied in *askēsis* and in becoming aware of one’s self.”⁴⁰

My aim in stringing together these different contemplative practices of self-attention is simply to highlight Hadot’s point that one can have wildly divergent metaphysical understandings of the self’s relationship to itself—Aristotelian, Plotinian, Kantian—whilst acknowledging that the central *askēsis* is structurally similar across cases. There is a self in each of these examples that takes itself as its own focus of attention and proceeds to direct itself in a direction according to the way of life advocated for by that school. Chase, somewhat provocatively, goes so far as to say that these fundamental exercises, common to many schools across time and place, are what really count. The various metaphysical systems and ideas they espouse or produce are secondary. In an important sense, they are only an effect of exercise,⁴¹ though as I’ll show in the section on Christian monastic practices, the shifts in meaning can be quite drastic.

Metaphysical differences aside for the moment, I have so far emphasized the privative side of *askēsis*—in *epoché*, dialectics, practices of death, bodily austerity, and so on—but these acts of suspension or withdrawal only account for a portion of what ascetism means. *Askēsis*, as I’ll describe now, is also an additive or productive action; it creates or bestows capacity through its execution. This theme is central in both Michel Foucault’s and Peter Sloterdijk’s work on *askēsis*.

Michel Foucault: On *Logos*, *Epistrophē*, and *Paraskeuē*

The notion that *askēsis* is as much additive as privative is central to Foucault’s larger discussion of the term. Readers will recognize a connection with Hadot when Foucault writes, “This is a work of the self on the self, an elaboration of the self by the self, a progressive transformation of the self by the self for which one takes responsibility in a long labor of

⁴⁰ Ibid., 201.

⁴¹ I take up this theme of an *askēsis* of the “I” developing a relationship to itself in more detail in chapter 2.

ascesis (*askēsis*).”⁴² Foucault also speaks of *askēsis* as “converting to oneself” through abstinence, meditations on death, trials of endurance, and self-examination, and as a question that asks, “What working practice is entailed by conversion to the self?”⁴³

Edward McGushin has written a very helpful book in this area titled simply *Foucault’s Askēsis*. This text makes clear that Foucault’s later work on the theme of care of the self is essential to his understanding of ascetic practices. McGushin writes, “Care of the self is therefor an *askēsis*, an exercise through which one becomes a subject.”⁴⁴ In addition to positioning care as a practice of the self, McGushin also emphasizes how *askēsis* results in an *addition* to the subject. One sees here the link between theory, or discursive knowledge, and the effect it has on the formation of the person. “Knowledge of things, of the world, is a spiritual practice insofar as it transforms the self,” is McGushin’s way of putting it, as he recounts how listening, reading, writing, and speaking are also modes of ascetic practice. *Mēlētē*, or solitary, meditative exercise, in this case, is another example McGushin gives, which again points to the recursivity inherent to ascetic practice. McGushin writes, “In a meditation the subject is transformed, put to the test, and is, in a sense, at the mercy of the thoughts she thinks.”⁴⁵

As with Hadot’s understanding, Foucault marks a link between *philosophy*, or “the form of thought that asks what it is that enables the subject to have access to the truth and which attempts to determine the conditions and limits of the subject’s access to the truth,”⁴⁶ and *spirituality*, or “the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth.”⁴⁷ Here Foucault lists purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, “conversions of looking,” and “modifications of existence” as specifically spiritual

⁴² Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 16.

⁴³ See *ibid.*, pp. 321, 417, 311.

⁴⁴ McGushin, *Foucault’s Askēsis*, 125.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

exercises.⁴⁸ His discussion of *askēsis* emerges within this confluence of philosophy and spirituality.

A specific example that Foucault takes up in his text is the practice of *epistrophē*, which he variously describes a reversion, a recollection, a turning away from appearances, or an acknowledgement of one's own ignorance.⁴⁹ As I noted earlier, the structure of an ascetic practice can be similar across schools that hold wildly different metaphysical commitments—in, for example, the different ways the *meaning* of the self's relation to itself is rendered in Aristotelian, Plotinian, Kantian, and Christian monastic contexts—whilst still operating with a more or less isomorphic understanding of how to execute a practice.

Epistrophē is one of these practices. As Foucault notes, the notion of “turning away” from the world of appearances is present in Platonic and Hellenistic-Roman versions of *epistrophē*, while the meaning of such a turn is quite different in each philosophical context. The Platonic *epistrophē* involved a practice of recollecting one's “ontological homeland” (of truth, essence, Being, and so on), while the Hellenistic-Roman *epistrophē* had a much more immanent character, advocating not for a turning toward another, truer world outside of this one, but for a freedom achieved through turning away from appearances in the here and now.⁵⁰

Certainly, the emphasis on purification, renunciation, and *epistrophē* calls to mind ascetism's privative side, but even here Foucault is clear that this meaning does not account for the complex scope of ascetic practice. He writes,

We [modern peoples] understand ascesis as progressive renunciations leading to the essential renunciation, self-renunciation. We hear it with these resonances. I think ascesis (*askēsis*) had a profoundly different meaning for the Ancients. First of all, because obviously it did not involve the aim of

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 209–11.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

arriving at self-renunciation at the end of ascesis. It involved, rather, constituting oneself through *askēsis*.⁵¹

Askēsis is related here to the “self-transfiguration that is the happiness one takes in oneself.” This, says Foucault, was “the objective of *askēsis*.”⁵²

The sense I take from these passages is that *askēsis* may often involve renunciation of some kind, and in that sense it does point to a kind of rejection, but this act should be understood as a *productive rejection*. In other words, something new is acquired through the deployment of renunciation. Foucault continues, “In two words, ancient ascesis does not reduce: it equips, it provides.”⁵³ What does it provide? Foucault answers, it provides *paraskeuē* (in Greek) or *instructio* (in Latin). Foucault describes *paraskeuē* as “both an open and an oriented preparation of the individual for the events of life.”⁵⁴ It is in the nature of *askēsis* to deliver and install new capacities as one withdraws from old habits and behaviors.

Foucault continues, “In the ascesis, the *paraskeuē* involves preparing the individual for the future, for a future of unforeseen events whose general nature may be familiar to us, but which we cannot know whether and when they will occur.”⁵⁵ The image of the athlete returns in this context. The athlete, suggests Foucault, is the one who practices a certain kind of *askēsis*, to acquire *paraskeuē*, which can also imply an internalization of a certain *logos*, “or a rationality that states the truth and prescribes what we must do at the same time.”⁵⁶

These *logoi*—the sense here is that we internalize many of them—are important for Foucault, “They are inductive schemas of action, which, in their inductive value and effectiveness are such that when present in the

⁵¹ Ibid., 319.

⁵² Ibid., 320.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 321.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 323.

head, thoughts, heart, and even body of someone who possesses them, that person will then act as if spontaneously.”⁵⁷ *Askēsis* is in this sense not a practice opposed to understanding, but is in fact a practice that through its execution delivers understanding. One *learns* through ascetic practice. Foucault continues, “So, these material elements of rational logos [e.g., written instructions or examples] are effectively inscribed in the subject as matrices of action. This is *paraskeuē*. And the aim of the *askēsis* necessary to the athlete of life is to obtain this.”⁵⁸ *Askēsis*, then, is productive of such matrices of action, matrices that just are the body’s reorganization into new modes of being, into new modes of perception, which amounts to the same thing. Perception and being are integrally related through *askēsis*, a theme I also see pronounced in the work of Peter Sloterdijk.

Peter Sloterdijk: Athletics and Anthropotechnics

I’ll leave aside for the moment the larger conversation one could develop around Hadot, Foucault, and Sloterdijk, because doing justice to such a dialogue would require a whole new project unto itself. Instead, I’ll just mark simply—and inadequately—that the nexus of this conversation, in many ways precipitated first by Foucault’s picking up in his later works of a few central themes found in Hadot,⁵⁹ and then carried forward by Sloterdijk’s discussion of both his predecessors, centers around *askēsis* and its meaning. Each figure draws us back to practice in his own way.

But more specifically, in Sloterdijk’s work the image of the athlete becomes even more pronounced than in Foucault’s treatment. “The analogy between forms of sport and forms of discourse and knowledge should be taken as literally as possible,”⁶⁰ is how Sloterdijk puts it. The connection to sports and athletics is ubiquitous in this text, where the emphasis shifts from *askēsis* to ascetics, to “existential acrobatics,” “general ascetology,” and

⁵⁷ Ibid., 323.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 324.

⁵⁹ I’m thinking here of the 1980–1984 lecture series at the Collège de France, which includes the English language publications of *Subjectivity and Truth*, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, *The Government of Self and Others*, and *The Courage of Truth*.

⁶⁰ Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, 155.

“anthropotechnics.”⁶¹ *Askēsis* in this context is a gymnastic or acrobatic ability, whether in a physical or conceptual domain.

Sloterdijk suggests that general ascetology is concerned with the question, “What is the business of the practicing life, and to what end is it pursued?”⁶² And he defines anthropotechnics as a general means of “turning the power of repetition against repetition.”⁶³ While these themes bear strong conceptual resemblance to those found in Hadot and Foucault, it’s difficult not to acknowledge a shift in tone with Sloterdijk. Here the text warbles, and the paragraphs move in non-linear directions. It’s not clear that his major text on the topic of asceticism, *You Must Change Your Life*, should even be read from start to finish, or if the text itself isn’t some gymnastics arena designed to put the reader through their paces.

To be sure, the text is primarily concerned with the power of habit and repetition, and how both play a pronounced role in shaping human perception and behavior, but it’s also a technical manual for escaping the grip of habit and automatic thinking. Here’s Sloterdijk with a representative theme of the work, “As soon as one knows that one is possessed by automated programs—affects, habits, notions—it is time for possession-breaking measures.”⁶⁴ The sense here is that certain practices make possible the re-shaping of one’s life and identity (i.e., the book is full of “possession-breaking measures”). “In this manner,” writes Sloterdijk, “a subject human gradually sets itself apart from the object human,”⁶⁵ the point being that the patterns of repetition that shape identity can be taken up into awareness and redirected through the intentional deployment of regimes of training (*askēsis*). The object human, gripped by habit, becomes the subject human, able to act on him or herself.

⁶¹ Ibid., 336–337.

⁶² Ibid., 155.

⁶³ Ibid., 196.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 197.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

I quote Sloterdijk at length to provide the reader with a sense for his concern with this topic:

No activity evades the principle of retroactive influence on the operator—and whatever reacts to earlier events also effects later ones. The act produces the actor, the reflection the reflected, the emotion the feeler, and the test of conscience the conscience itself. . . . The practicing life is not limited to a simple reproduction of actors by their actions, however. All expansions of ability circles, all increases extending to the furthest caves of artistry, take place on the basis of self-shaping through practice.⁶⁶

Sloterdijk gives many names to the species whose work is precisely this “self-shaping through practice,” including *Homo repetitivus*, *Homo artista*, and *Homo immunologicus*.⁶⁷ This human-in-training is a student of self-disciplines, and an athlete in pursuit of *mechané* (cunning), anthropotechnics (the practicing of self-forming), and the *bios theoretikos* (the contemplative life).⁶⁸ This practitioner is engaged in a “philosophical multisport” in “the exercise of existence.”⁶⁹ For Sloterdijk, the pursuit of these “ability systems” forms the basis of a somatic idealism and an intellectual athleticism, an integration of the deliverances of practice.

Hadot, Foucault, and Sloterdijk all deploy *askēsis* and the notion of ascetic practices in their work. In each case, *askēsis* is something like a fundamental requirement for living a philosophical life, present in all schools of philosophy when viewed in the right way, and though diverse in deployment in execution, share in the theme of transformation of the person in the direction emphasized by a school’s way of life, by its existential commitments, values, and beliefs. This is all true enough of philosophy, but *askēsis* is not limited to philosophy alone. It’s also central to Christian monastic practice (and, to be sure, other spiritual and religious schools I do

⁶⁶ Ibid., 320.

⁶⁷ Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, 10.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 47, 170.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 154.

not treat here), as well as to aesthetic disciplines, like art, poetry, and literature. I turn next to these disciplines.

Christian Monastic Practices

I have been suggesting that *askēsis* is a concept found in many disciplines, traditions, and time periods. Christian monastic practices, for example, would certainly fall within the scope of ascetic practices in general. “Like Greek philosophy,” says Hadot, “Christian philosophy presented itself both as a discourse and as a way of life.”⁷⁰ Hadot centers fourth century Christian monasticism as especially relevant here, “This was the time when some Christians began to attain Christian perfection through the heroic practice of Christ’s evangelical advice and the imitation of his life: they retired into the desert, and led lives completely devoted to rigorous *askēsis* and to meditation.”⁷¹

Philosophy and Christianity

I find it telling, as Douglas Burton-Christie reports, that the Christian monk—in his words, the “one seeking the place of God”⁷²—is in search for a physical place, the monastery, but also a spiritual or imaginary one. “A monastery is first and foremost a place—not only a physical place but also a place of the imagination,” are his words.⁷³ At a minimum, the monastery is place of dwelling, in thought or in space; it’s a *cell* within which practice is afforded. Burton-Christie continues, “The cell, in this view, was the place where the monk was to seek and find God in the long, often arduous *askesis* of silence and solitude. Dwelling, staying put, and entering into the space of the cell were means to go deeper in the monastic quest for God.”⁷⁴ What I want to draw attention to here is that *askēsis* occurs in a place. It is a mode

⁷⁰ Ibid., 239.

⁷¹ Ibid., 242.

⁷² Burton-Christie, “Early Monasticism,” 43.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

of training, and as such requires a *training ground*, a theme I will return to in greater detail later in the dissertation.

The modes of Christian ascetic practice will also recall for the reader contours of *askēsis* I’ve already described in the earlier Greek-Hellenic context. In Christian contemplative asceticism, for example, the themes, already evident in Stoicism and Neoplatonism, of attending to oneself, concentrating on the present, and meditating on death return. As Hadot says, “Attention to oneself, concentration on the present, and the thought of death were constantly linked together within the monastic tradition, as they had been in secular philosophy.”⁷⁵

A specific example given here is the examination of conscience, both in a meditative, introspective mode, but also in writing. “The therapeutic value of the examination of the conscience will be greater if it is externalized by means of writing,” Hadot says, because “writing gives us the impression that we are in public.”⁷⁶ The sense of *askēsis* here is that examination and externalization aid the development of the person’s life, in their practices of self-making, but also, as Dailey says, because “reading presents the opportunity not only for the exegesis of scripture but also for the exegesis of experience and the cultivation—and construction—of the inner body and the inner senses.”⁷⁷ The body is itself the site of an exegetical practice, and it is in many ways precisely that which is transformed through ascetic exercise, though the monastic tradition, in Dailey’s reading, would see the body as only one component of an anthropology that included the body, mind, and soul.

Evagrius of Pontus: *Theoria* and *Praktikē*

The desert monk Evagrius of Pontus is also raised by Hadot as an important touchstone in this discussion.⁷⁸ Here Hadot links Evagrian Christianity to Platonic philosophy through a three-part schema of philosophy, which

⁷⁵ Ibid., 243.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 244.

⁷⁷ Dailey, “The Body and Its Senses,” 267.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 249–251.

included *praxis* (“a preliminary purification that enables the student to begin acquiring impassivity (*apatheia*) with regards to the passions”), *physics* (“the contemplation of ‘nature’ [*physeis*]”), and *theology* (“the contemplation of the mystery of God in his trinity”).⁷⁹ One sees here both a connection to earlier ascetic exercises (e.g., practice as a preparation for philosophy, the self as a central locus of examination and exercise), but also a pronounced shift in metaphysical commitments (e.g., the emergence of Christ and the trinitarian God as the focus of practice).

There’s also an interesting, and more esoteric, point to be made about Evagrius here, and his conjoining of *theoria* and *praktikē*. As Jacob Given details, Evagrius was concerned to bring right alignment between the *nous* (the higher, contemplative mind) and the body, united as it was to a “lower soul,” turned away from God. The goal of practice for Evagrius was to bring all three into alignment. Given writes, “The art of monasticism, then, is one of reorientation, of ascetical work aimed at right ordering of body, soul, and mind.”⁸⁰ Again, this view accords with the more general attitude, common to early and medieval Christianity alike, that humans are comprised of both inner and outer senses.⁸¹

One of these ascetic practices, or rather a group of them, was concerned with defending against the *logizmoi* (or “afflicting thoughts”) of the demons who sought to turn people away from God. Part of Evagrian *askēsis*, then, is combat, rooted in demonology. Given continues,

The purpose of demonological knowledge in Evagrian monasticism is combat: to build a repertoire of gestures and maneuvers, which is just as important to the monastic art as knowledge of the hierarchy of demons. Evagrian knowledge is tactical. To that end, Evagrius gives indications not only of things, but also and primarily of *ways*, modes of encounter,

⁷⁹ Ibid., 250.

⁸⁰ Given, “Evagrius’s Demons,” para. 4.

⁸¹ Dailey, “The Body and Its Senses,” 264–276.

learned maneuvers, tactics of opposition. He gives ascetic choreographic indications.⁸²

The examples one finds here include fasting, and more precisely, prayers and scriptures read to ensure that the fast is a success; these are words spoken to stave off the threat of gluttony, the desire to break the fast and fulfill the body's urges. Given writes, "Even the very act of reciting scripture moves the monk interiorly, bringing him to a posture incompatible with gluttony."⁸³ This is how *theoria* comports with *praktikē*, or rather becomes a mode of *praktikē*: The discursive knowledge (activated in prayer or scripture) becomes the means by which the body re-directs itself towards its practical aim. *Theoria* is its own *askēsis*.

My point here is not to find a subtle and essential "*askēsis*" that transcends each of these examples, but simply to emphasize that when the microscope is turned onto the topic, the practicing life is found deeply connected to philosophy, religion, and spirituality alike. As the anthropologist of religion Talal Asad notes, "It is a modern idea that a practitioner cannot know how to live religiously without being able to articulate that knowledge."⁸⁴ The point being, practice (*askēsis*) is seen as essential to religious and philosophical life, not because practice is a tertiary support to knowledge or theory, but because practice is itself a means of achieving understanding, or to put it in other terms, *askēsis* is in a sense itself a mode of knowledge deliverance, even when it cannot be articulated verbally, or formally, through propositions.

Shaping the Wax: Monasticism in the Middle Ages

Those living the monastic life of the early Middle Ages—that is, those concerned with developing and forming a Christian self—also developed their own practices, including liturgy, singing, and other ascetic actions related to specific ways of eating, sleeping, working, and praying. These practices, Asad says, were teleological in nature, "Each thing to be done was

⁸² Ibid., para. 8.

⁸³ Ibid., para. 13.

⁸⁴ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 36.

not only to be done aptly in itself, but done in order to make the self approximate more and more to a predefined model of excellence.”⁸⁵ The idea here is that ascetic practices were anchored towards some ideal model or exemplar, and that such an ideal would serve as a lure for thought and behavior. “In this conception,” Asad continues, “there could be no radical disjunction between social rituals and individual sentiments, between activities that are expressive and those that are technical.”⁸⁶

The essence of this approach is that one’s unruly and disorganized disposition could through ascetic limitation and ritual repetition grow progressively more organized around virtue, a process marked as incomplete or as insufficiently accomplished by the presence of things like hypocrisy or self-deception. In this context, *askēsis* takes a more austere form: The hypocritical, self-deceiving person seeks correction through practices of ascetism, including self-punishment, chastising the body, penance, fasting, and so on. “The body, is to be chastised, we are told, because it is an obstacle to the attainment of the perfect truth,”⁸⁷ is how Asad phrases it later in his text. The image invoked in this context is of a subject made of wax—moldable, impressionable, inscribed and shaped by its own actions, good or bad, with asceticism functioning as a method of restoring or reconfiguring the wax mold; it’s a way of wiping clean the grooves of sin and bad habit impressed upon the wax of the soul.⁸⁸

The Christian contemplative Martin Laird evokes many of these same themes in a more contemporary idiom by emphasizing the conjoined practice of breath, attention, and prayer.⁸⁹ Laird, like Hadot, is clear that these practices have analogues in Buddhist, Hindu, and Zen traditions—again calling to mind the ubiquity of *askēsis*—but emphasizes those versions found in the West, especially those coming out of the monastic traditions I’ve been discussing, including in contemplatives like St. Gregory of Sinai,

⁸⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 106.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 33–41.

Evagrius of Pontus, Hesychius, Ignatius, and others.⁹⁰ Laird also makes Evagrius a focus of this discussion, “Evagrius,” Laird tells us, “is aware that the simple act of sitting still is an effective aid in the practice of vigilance and in keeping the attention from being stolen by thoughts.”⁹¹ Laird then takes us through such an exercise.

I paraphrase Laird’s instructions: He says to find a stable posture, breathe deeply from the abdomen, exhale longer than you inhale, recite to yourself a prayer word, place your attention on the breath, let the breath, the prayer word, and your attention grow together, and when you get distracted, relocate your attention to the breath and the prayer word. Repeat.⁹² Laird is an important contributor to this discussion both because of the specificity of his instruction, and because of his active influence on ascetic practice today. “Those who discover the wisdom of the breath,” Laird says, “find it a great refuge that grounds the mental calm that contemplative practice cultivates.”⁹³ This kind of meditative practice is *askēsis* in one of its contemplative and religious modes.

There is, then, a certain continuity in the modes of exercise present in spirituality, philosophy, and religion. I’ll reiterate that my purpose in this review is not genealogical, and so I am not concerned to demonstrate how ancient Greek practices become Platonic or Aristotelian ones, or how Hellenistic practices differ from their Roman counterparts—much less how all of these traditions share in a complex relationship to Christianity—that is a different project. I have much more modestly noted here that the boundary between philosophy and religion softens considerably when viewed from the perspective of practice. I will now further soften those boundaries by including in this conversation the aesthetic dimension of ascetic practices, or what I would call aesthetic *askēsis*.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 33.

⁹² Ibid., 42–43.

⁹³ Ibid., 44.

***Askēsis* in Art and Aesthetics**

I noted earlier that Platonic *askēsis*, as seen in the beholding of the vision of beauty described in the *Symposium*, is a kind of aesthetic *askēsis*, which is also capable of transfiguring the self in unique ways. This kind of *askēsis* figures strongly in the work of Gabriel Tropic. Tropic positions art as a way of life, as an *askēsis* “that continually modifies, often imperceptibly, the manifold patterns of being—whether they are perceptual, behavioral, or affective of the person who undertakes it.”⁹⁴ Art and aesthetics for Tropic exist in a dual sense, both in the mode of existing art objects created and released into the world, and in the sense that the artistic act is about refiguring the perception of the artist, and the viewer of the work of art.

The work of aesthetics is thus understood as an active effort of training perception. As Tropic notes, “The aesthetic subject, in the act of giving form and plasticity to the world, simultaneously molds its own perceptual capacities.”⁹⁵ Tropic refers to this molding as a form of perceptual and cognitive *askēsis*; it’s a kind of training or preparation that begins first as an act of mimesis, whereby the artist attempts to mimic or bring forward some aspect of the world, but ultimately drives at self-transformation,⁹⁶ at becoming the type of being for whom that aspect of the world is present. The same applies to the art viewer.

Art is in this sense a means of transforming the physiognomy of seeing. The art object in Tropic’s understanding is a material presence that interacts with and transforms the ordering of perceptual experience. Tropic for example speaks of “how art influences patterns of cognition and ways of perceiving in the world,”⁹⁷ but he’s clear that such a transformation is not the effect of a simple or passive receptivity. It is rather the influence of aesthetic regimes of practice. “The aesthetic exercise,” writes Tropic, “is generated not from the object itself or its intrinsic properties, but from the attempt to weave it into

⁹⁴ Tropic, *Poetry as a Way of Life*, 4.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16

our identities, our actions, and our commitments.”⁹⁸ As with the idea of *askēsis* in general, aesthetic *askēsis* involves work, aimed this time at a craft: “To practice art as a vocation, as a craft requiring a set of skills and a certain *technē*, necessarily presupposes exercises that generate a specific way of being in the world.”⁹⁹

It’s worth repeating that *askēsis* is related to regimes of exercise, but also to notions of living or being in the world in a certain way, often with an expressed spiritual commitment or understanding of being human. Thus we have Trop echoing sentiments one also finds in Hadot, such as the notion of the human being as a practicing being, an open-ended project partially exposed to its own effort of self-transformation and organization. Here one should not be surprised that Trop, like Hadot, also appeals throughout his work to “ancient exercises [that] aimed to produce certain patterns of thought and action.”¹⁰⁰

This emphasis on exercise is also a central theme, as I described earlier, in the work of Sloterdijk, who Trop also picks up in his text, if only to distinguish *askēsis* in its aesthetic mode from Sloterdijk’s own version of it. For all his generality and scope of vision, there’s a sense in Sloterdijk that *askēsis* is skewed towards performance and optimization, at least this is how Gabriel Trop reads him,

For Sloterdijk, exercise constitutes a critical element in the maintenance of the organism, in its optimization, in its ability to secure itself from threats of its surroundings and in its expansive power over its environment. Exercise serves a primarily immunological function. . . .

The reduction of exercise solely to optimization appears particularly problematic in the domain of art, above

⁹⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 5. *Technē* is an important relative of *askēsis* but tends to refer more specifically to craft works, “An art, skill, or craft; a technique, principle, or method by which something is achieved or created” (*OED*, s.v. “*techne*,” accessed July 30, 2019, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/273538?redirectedFrom=techne#eid>)

¹⁰⁰ Trop, *Poetry as a Way of Life*, 9.

all because art often ends in questions rather than in imperatives.¹⁰¹

But of course this isn't the only way to read ascetic practice, and Trop takes the discussion in a different direction, even as he does maintain a privileged connection between aesthetics and spiritual exercise.

Trop links the importance of spiritual exercise specifically to his notion of the human, writing, "To regard the human being as one who practices, as *Homo exercitans*, gives to the human being the perpetual status of being unfinished."¹⁰² The aesthetic *askēsis* Trop is concerned with is precisely this kind of spiritual exercise, which gives way to the development of the whole human being, to the formation of his or her inner and outer sensibilities. *Askēsis* is in this sense the effort to coordinate in a directed way the manifold of sensuous perception so as to achieve a certain understanding of things, or at the very least to reinforce oneself against the tide of unexamined opinion, derived either from one's own psychology or from the surrounding society.

Trop's emphasis on exercise in aesthetic *askēsis* can make it sound like these practices are limited to modes of strict self-discipline alone. To be sure, while certain styles of *askēsis* do emphasize austerity, celibacy, fasting, physical endurance, and so on, Trop makes clear that *askēsis* in its aesthetic mode also includes the lively cultivation of the senses through music, art, and poetry. Such acts of creativity come with their own affects that one can appreciate in the light of ascetic practice. As Trop states, "Lightness, joy, and play are not the opposite of *askesis*; rather, they can be a product of it."¹⁰³ It is not, then, a set of specific feelings that circumscribe Trop's aesthetic *askēsis*, it is rather the emphasis on the creation of artistic objects, which in turn recirculate back into the perception of their creators and viewers, that forms the basis of this mode of ascetic practice and exercise.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 7

¹⁰² Ibid., 25.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 31–32.

In this regard, Trop writes about the spiritual reading of key texts—his own exemplars being eighteenth-century German poets such as Friedrich Holderlin, Novalis, Friedrich von Hagedorn, and Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim—as itself a kind of aesthetic exercise of reorganization or formation of the self.¹⁰⁵ As with the art objects created by the artist, Trop is concerned here to highlight the transformative circularity between the text and its reader, whereby thought itself is transformed by the literary power of the trained writer, the ascetic aesthete. Poetry, for example, is treated in this sense in terms of its power to affect our ways of seeing in the world. Trop repeats again his central thesis to drive this point home, “Aesthetic *askēsis* modifies the very structures of perception and cognition of the self.”¹⁰⁶

Poetry is one way of achieving this transformation. As Trop writes of the poet Friedrich von Hardenberg, “Poetry is not merely something we do, a thing composed or enjoyed, one human activity among others. It is the atmosphere in which we live and breathe.”¹⁰⁷ What could such a statement possibly mean, poetry is the atmosphere in which we live and breathe? It’s a subtle point, and I take Trop to mean *poetry* more in the general sense of *poiesis*, from the Greek meaning “creation” or “production,”¹⁰⁸ than in a limited, literary sense (though the two are entwined). Trop continues, writing on the poet Novalis,

For Novalis, the form-generating activity of the human being [that which I take to be a kind of *poiesis*] does not merely create things, objects in the world, but rather, new worlds in which objects themselves find their home. . . . for poetry is not a thing (*Ding*), but a world in which things appear.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 25.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 26.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 123.

¹⁰⁸ *OED*, s.v. “poiesis,” accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/146580?rskey=O96DdD&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>

¹⁰⁹ Trop, *Poetry as a Way of Life*, 123.

Poetry is in this sense more a world-forming incantation than a representation, or perhaps it is, like the philosophical systems discussed above, an effect of the ascetic practices that preceded it. Hadot expresses a similar sentiment when he writes, “the philosophical act transcends the literary work that expresses it.”¹¹⁰ One could say the same of art, music, poetry, science, or religion. Each one is a record, a crater left in the mind by an impact, by some psychic event, by a moment achieved in thought or perception; it is an experience rendered by the human power to transfigure the body in the direction of new possibilities of being. Aesthetic *askēsis* is the preparation required for calling forth this event.

The Primacy of Practice in the Modern World

The definition Hadot gives of philosophy as a spiritual exercise, in addition to the links between Greek philosophy, Christian monastic practice, and aesthetics I’ve just highlighted, makes it clear that *askēsis* is not bounded by the categories of philosophy, spirituality, art, or religion. In fact, *askēsis* is in many ways an avenue by which one might unite them, their many possible differences notwithstanding. It’s no surprise, then, that debates over the role of *askēsis* in philosophical practice emerge in both philosophy and religion. I’m thinking here specifically of John Cottingham’s account of the philosophy of religion, and the important, if not defining, role that *askēsis* plays within it.¹¹¹

As Cottingham notes, “To be religious is not just to espouse certain doctrines; it is to follow a certain way of life and to take up certain commitments. It is in part a project of formation, of forming or reforming the self, a process of *askēsis* (training) or of *mathēsis* (learning).”¹¹² Cottingham’s definition of the religious life mirrors quite closely Hadot’s account of the philosophical one. In both cases, the path set forth is not limited to mere discursivity or doctrinal memorization; it is in fact a way of

¹¹⁰ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, xxx.

¹¹¹ Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 148.

life that extends into the practices and habits of the whole person. The spiritual life is above all about the priority of practice. “It suggests not just the theoretical acquisition of knowledge,” writes Cottingham, “but a structured programme supported by rules and practices.”¹¹³

As a way of life, Cottingham’s philosophy of religion aims for the long view. In his own words, “The ‘conversion’ at which spiritual practices have traditionally been aimed is not conceived of as something that can be completed on a particular day, or even over a single season, but is thought of as a lifelong process.”¹¹⁴ Cottingham lists among these practices activities like prayer, fasting, and meditation, all engaged in with “the goal of achieving a vision of reality that would lead to self-understanding and self-transformation.”¹¹⁵ As with many other instances of *askēsis* I’ve described, the practices Cottingham concerns himself with include acts of privation (e.g., fasting), but ultimately go beyond them. As I said earlier, *Askēsis* is as much an additive enterprise as it is a subtractive one. “The central notion of *askēsis*, found for example in Epictetus,” Cottingham writes, “implied not so much ‘asceticism’ in the modern sense as a practical programme of training, concerned with the ‘art of living.’”¹¹⁶

This “practical programme of training” is precisely what Cottingham finds missing from the modern curriculum of philosophy. Foucault makes a similar point when he diagnosis a certain “Cartesian moment” in the history of philosophy wherein the transformations of the self underwritten by *askēsis* are replaced by the simpler and more universal requirements of the twin acquisition of knowledge and evidence.¹¹⁷ Foucault’s argument is that there is a point in modern philosophy, marked by Descartes, where acquiring knowledge without the need of a corresponding transformation of the self comes to prominence.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 149.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 150.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 14–17.

Hadot for his part is skeptical that Foucault’s reading in this area really captures the essence of Descartes’s philosophy and method—Descartes’s major work is after all titled *Meditations*, which Hadot I think correctly reads as an explicit reference to the type of practice of self-transformation that *askēsis* implies—and yet there is a sense where, if not by name, the “Cartesian moment” does mark a more general shift away from practices of transformation and towards the reduction of philosophy to something like propositional knowledge and argumentation, learned and memorized without requiring a change in the subject.

Hadot cites the emergence of Christianity and the European university system as two reasons for the shift away from practice in philosophy,¹¹⁸ but Cottingham has an additional angle worth considering here. While Descartes’s meditations should be read as a series of spiritual exercises, as an *askēsis* of self-transformation, he in the end advocates for a different way forward, specifically, for the use of new scientific methods to shortcut the need for practice in the transformation of the person.

Cottingham poses Descartes’s question, a reality Descartes believes will be made possible by a future science, this way, “[Instead of emphasizing practice] why not simply modify the course of the nervous impulses, so that the damaging inclinations that lead us off the path of virtue are rechanneled toward more healthy and more worthy objects?”¹¹⁹ Descartes on Cottingham’s telling is advocating for hacking the biological system to achieve what before was attained only through practice, discipline, and dedication aimed in the direction of some moral, aesthetic, and veridical good. But, as Cottingham continues, “Such induced changes have no inherent moral significance: their value hinges merely on their instrumentality toward some desired end.”¹²⁰

Philosophy cannot be reduced to such instrumental ends; it is not compatible with Cartesian biohacking. *Askēsis*, and the transformation it enables, is embedded in the practice of practice itself. There is no

¹¹⁸ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy*.

¹¹⁹ Cottingham, “Philosophy and Self-Improvement,” 161.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

shortcutting the repetition, endurance, and commitment needed in the life of practice. The deliverances afforded by *askēsis* have no shortcuts; they can only be achieved in training. As Cottingham states,

However, sincere and well-intentioned Descartes's own vision may have been of what the new science could achieve in the ethical sphere, what he has in fact unleashed is a seductive fantasy of a swift and easy "fix" for the good life the idea that we have the power to get to where we want by any technological means available.¹²¹

Life hacks have their role in the world, but shortcutting philosophical practice isn't one of them. In many ways, *askēsis* is the opposite of the shortcut to practice promised by Cartesian fixes. It is a transfiguration of the self achieved only through walking the path set by practice, and this will remain true today, tomorrow, and long into the future. If humans ever leave this planet, there will be ascetics training in the darkness of space.

The Ascetic Repertoire

I have given here only a preliminary review of *askēsis* in philosophy, spirituality, religion, and art. The reader should take this account as a synoptic fly-by; it's a single pass of the terrain shot from 10,000 feet. Still, my aim was to illustrate the importance of *askēsis* in human life. Prayer, fasting, meditation, exercise, liturgy, singing, austerity, listening, reading, and speaking are, in the most basic sense, modes of *askēsis* when approached with a deliberate, intentional mindset.

I implore the reader to spend more time with the examples I described, with Greek *epoché*, Neoplatonic contemplative attention, mystical or beatific experiences, Platonic dialectics and death practices (*meleté thanatou*), Foucault's care of the self, *epistrophé* (turning away), *paraskeuē* (capacity to act), and *logos* (reason), Sloterdijk's anthropotechnics, Christian *theoria* and *praktiké*, demonology, and the transfiguration of the self through art and poetry. Each one is a portal unto itself, worthy of further attention. My point is only that *askēsis* is an ongoing process of self-transformation. It

¹²¹ Ibid., 163.

cannot be shortened, avoided, or replaced. *Askēsis* is the central fact of human development.

Bibliography

- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Burton-Christie, Douglas. 2012. “Early Monasticism.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, edited by Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman, 37–58. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Chase, Michael. 2013a. “Introduction.” In *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancients and Moderns, Essays in Honor of Pierre Hadot*, edited by Michael Chase, Stephen R. L. Clark, and Michael McGhee, 1–9. Malden, Massachusetts: John Wiley & Sons.
- . 2013b. “Observations on Pierre Hadot’s Conception of Philosophy as a Way of Life.” In *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancients and Moderns, Essays in Honor of Pierre Hadot*, edited by Michael Chase, Stephen R. L. Clark, and Michael McGhee, 262–286. Malden, Massachusetts: John Wiley & Sons.
- Cottingham, John. 2014. *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a more Humane Approach*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2013. “Philosophy and Self-Improvement: Continuity and Change in Philosophy’s Self-Conception from the Classical to the Early-Modern Era.” In *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancients and Moderns, Essays in Honor of Pierre Hadot*, edited by Michael Chase, Stephen R. L. Clark, and Michael McGhee, 148–166. Malden, Massachusetts: John Wiley & Sons.
- Dailey, Patricia. 2012. “The Body and Its Senses.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, edited by Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman, 264–276. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 2001. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982*. New York, NY: Picador.

- Given, Jacob. 2019. “Evagrius’s Demons.” *The Side View*, July 11, 2019.
<https://thesideview.co/articles/evagriuss-demons/>
- Hadot, Pierre. 2004. *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press.
- . 1995. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1970. *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Laird, Martin. 2006. *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McGhee, Michael. 2000. *Transformations of Mind: Philosophy as Spiritual Practice*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- McGushin, Edward F. 2007. *Foucault’s Askēsis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Merton, Thomas. 2017. *A Course in Christian Mysticism*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press.
- Rizvi, H. Sajjad. 2013. “Approaching Islamic Philosophical Texts: Reading Mullā Sadrā Šīrāzī (d. 1635) with Pierre Hadot.” In *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancients and Moderns Essays in Honor of Pierre Hadot*, edited by Michael Chase, Stephen R. L. Clark, and Michael McGhee, 132–147. Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley Blackwell.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. 2013. *You Must Change Your Life*. Malden, Massachusetts: Polity Press.
- Trop, Gabriel. 2015. *Poetry as a Way of Life: Aesthetics and Askesis in the German Eighteenth Century*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.