

# Revisioning Reason and Spiritual Exercise

ADAM ROBBERT  
adam@thesideview.co

September 18, 2020

The French philosopher and historian Pierre Hadot dedicated his career to rendering an image of philosophy as a way of life. This way of life, Hadot often underscored, was anchored to a set of spiritual exercises that were neither merely preparations for nor complements to philosophical theory. Instead, the practices were themselves the vehicles by which philosophical illumination could be achieved. Hadot would speak of both inner and outer expressions of practice, as different ways of achieving a transfiguration of the self, and especially of realizing a metamorphosis in our way of seeing the world.<sup>1</sup> These practices were spiritual in nature precisely because they included and worked on the human being as an aesthetic, emotional, intellectual, and bodily whole.

The definition Hadot gives of philosophy as a spiritual exercise makes it clear that *askēsis* is not bounded by the categories of philosophy, spirituality, art, or religion. *Askēsis* is prior to their differentiation, and it is in many ways an avenue by which one might re-unite them, their many possible differences notwithstanding. Indeed, philosophers of the ancient

---

<sup>1</sup> Hadot, “Philosophy as Life and as Quest for Wisdom,” 88.

period did not organize their lives around a set of theoretical beliefs alone, but also around the performance of rituals, practices, and techniques for transforming thinking, being, and perceiving.<sup>2</sup> I will expand on these points in the following chapter, but for now I want to focus on *askēsis* from a more general and theoretical perspective.

The claim I am making about the role of *askēsis* in philosophical development, and its inherent connection to exercises best called spiritual, religious, or existential, runs counter to other prominent scholars, like John Cooper, who likewise put the weight of their attention on Greek and Roman philosophy, but argue for a different definition of philosophy as a way of life rooted exclusively in reason, rather than in the broader sweep of practices suggested by Hadot.

I want to draw out Cooper’s position in order to offer an alternative account of philosophy as a way of life rooted in *askēsis*, an attitude that embraces reason and discursive precision but also includes the disciplines of self-examination, therapy of the passions, fasting, meditation, training of the inner and outer senses, athletics, cultivation of virtue, aesthetic discernment, visionary states, and more. I will challenge Cooper’s view by emphasizing two areas: first, the historical case for spiritual exercise in ancient philosophy, and second, the practical issue of exercise as it relates to philosophical transformation. I will then suggest that Hadot offers a pathway within which reason and spiritual exercise can be viewed as complementary aspects of a reciprocal whole.

Cooper’s book *Pursuits of Wisdom* is a prodigious resource for understanding ancient philosophy, but his view of philosophy is quite different from Hadot’s, whom Cooper spends the opening of his work in debate with, contesting what the nature of living philosophically is, truly. Specifically, Cooper argues that the “essential core” of philosophy is a style of logical, reasoned argument by which one lives life. However, Hadot argues for a richer characterization. Hadot sees the “core” of philosophy as rooted in an “existential choice” that involves commitment to a set of spiritual exercises that serve as the preconditions (or even the deliverers of) the arguments and reasons Cooper sees as essential to philosophy. Hadot’s view is not anti-reason, far from it. Reason has an important role to play in his account of philosophy, but philosophy is not limited to reason alone; in the first place, it also involves *askēsis*, exercises or practices we could call religious, contemplative, aesthetic, or athletic, and in the second, these practices, as I will show below, play an essential role in ensuring reason’s healthy function.

---

<sup>2</sup> Glenn Most, “Philosophy and Religion,” 300–322.

Cooper for his part is pessimistic about religious and spiritual practices, drawing a strong division between them and the reasoned advance of philosophy. Here is Cooper in his own words:

The essential core of philosophy is a certain, specifically and recognizably philosophical, style of logical, reasoned argument and analysis. . . . One must take with utmost seriousness that what the ancient philosophers, following Socrates’s innovative lead, are proposing is that we live our lives from some set of argued through, rationally worked out, rationally grasped, and rationally defended ideas about the world and one’s own place within it. . . . A philosophical way of life is therefore in fundamental ways quite a different thing from any religious way of life.<sup>3</sup>

I would not contest outright Cooper’s description of the relation between reason and philosophy. Instead, I want to show that it is a partial view, and that readers profit from understanding in more detail how Socrates thought about his own philosophical mission, as relayed by Plato, since it is Socrates whom Cooper notes is the innovator of his reason-based view of philosophy. I want to question the adequacy of this view of Socrates.

If one assumes that religious life is circumscribed by a doctrinal, unthinking submission to texts, then Cooper is right to say this mode of thought has no business in philosophy, and this is very much how Cooper reads Socrates in, for example, his introduction to Plato’s dialogue *Apology*, where Cooper says of Socrates, “He has no truck with the authority of myths or ancient poets or religious tradition and ‘divination’ to tell us what to think about the gods and their commands or wishes as regards ourselves.”<sup>4</sup> Cooper here foregrounds the Socratic commitment to a “recognizably philosophical, style of logical, reasoned argument and analysis” but it would be a mistake to think of this commitment along modern secular lines, or that Socrates has rejected what today we might call religious epistemological frameworks. Let me explain in more detail.

As Plato has him say in *Apology*, Socrates speaks upon the basis of reason *because* of a message he receives from the oracle at Delphi, “I shall call upon the god at Delphi as witness to the existence and nature of my wisdom, if it

---

<sup>3</sup> Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Cooper, Introduction to *Apology*, 18. This comment prefaces the dialogue *Apology* but is actually a comment derived from a reading of *Euthyphro*.

be such,”<sup>5</sup> is what Socrates says early in the dialogue. The wisdom of Socrates, which is famously expressed in his phrase, “I do not think I know what I do not know,”<sup>6</sup> is the ground upon which he will go on to investigate the wisdom (or absence of it) in the politicians, poets, and craftsmen of Athens. This task, he says, has been impressed upon him by the oracle. “So even now,” Socrates says, “I continue this investigation as the god bade me—and I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or stranger, whom I think wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him he is not wise.”<sup>7</sup>

Readers familiar with this dialogue will know it is precisely this activity of revealing the lack of wisdom in the people of Athens, especially in its leaders, that leads to the trial of Socrates that *Apology* recounts. The official charge is impiety—Socrates has offended the official gods of the city—to which Socrates responds, as we have just seen, that he is in fact acting out on behalf of the gods’ demands, and upon their wish that we improve the quality of our understanding of things so that we can better pursue the good, and that we do so in order to see better what it is we ought to care about and concern ourselves within this life.

There is a tension, then, not between reason and the religious—mythological language that Socrates employs, but between a view of religious—mythological language that is open to exploration by reason and one that is not. Socrates takes up the second view. He recounts the charges brought against him in the following way, “Socrates is guilty of corrupting the young and of not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, *but in other spiritual things*.”<sup>8</sup> The implication here is not, I will say again, that Socrates is adhering strictly to reason in any modern or secular sense, but rather that it his own practices and experiences with the gods, and especially with the Apollo of the Delphic oracle, that orient him towards a different set of beliefs, to “the other spiritual things” noted in the charges brought against him. And what are those things?

The answer is surely the philosophy now called Platonism, which, as Lloyd Gerson has shown, is in fact older than Plato himself<sup>9</sup>—not in name, of

---

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 21a.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 21e.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 22b.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 24c, emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> See Gerson, *Plato and Platonism* for a longer discussion of this idea.

course, but in commitments that include the soul's recollection of universal forms, its capacity for reincarnation, and of asceticism as a route to understanding the nature of both.<sup>10</sup> Notably, the philosophy of which Platonism is but one vivid expression is also, in Gerson's words, committed to rejecting the metaphysics and epistemology associated with materialism, mechanism, nominalism, relativism, and skepticism.<sup>11</sup> The character of these claims is important, but I will leave aside the more complicated question of whether or not Socratic and Platonic philosophy are the same, and of whether or not they exhibit a uniformity of belief on these questions (though it is worth nothing that Gerson argues they do).<sup>12</sup> My task here is simply to show the breadth of the methods and insights used when taking about philosophy as a way of life in the Socratic sense we inherit from Plato's dialogues and elsewhere.

My point is, one can agree with Cooper that Socrates exposes beliefs of all kinds to the demands of rigorous modes of examination based in reason, but also that he pursues this rational activity on the basis of a broader method founded in part upon an archetypal demand, and this demand places him at odds with the state of Athens, not with the notion of divinity itself. In fact, his effort is made on behalf of this divinity, and the task that Socrates executes for the oracle at Delphi is, in addition to the works of reason, central to how we should think of Socrates. Here is how Plato's Socrates describes this obligation:

I was attached to this city by the god—though it seems a ridiculous thing to say—as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly. It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city. I never cease to rouse each and everyone of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company.<sup>13</sup>

Philosophy ought to be accountable to both reason and archetypal demand, and to do so, I argue, it must take on board *askēsis*, spiritual exercise, in the way that Hadot argues for in his work. However, this commitment does not imply for Hadot that Socrates merely continues the work of the pre-Socratic

---

<sup>10</sup> Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Gerson, *Plato and Platonism*, 229.

<sup>12</sup> See Gerson, *Plato and Platonism*, 34–72.

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 30e–31a.

thinkers of archaic Greeks (to use his terms for this period).<sup>14</sup> Hadot is skeptical, for example, of those historians who have suggested that Socrates was something like “the last shaman and the first philosopher.”<sup>15</sup> Without taking this discussion too far afield, it is worth noting that, as Hadot says, there is overlap between the religious and ritual aspects of archaic Greek culture and those of shamanism, but there is not, anthropologically, grounds for a straightforward comparison. Still, it seems the case that, as part of their “ascetic life-discipline” pre-Socratic figures like Aristeas and Pythagoras did engage in spiritual exercises of self-transformation of the type that Hadot describes,<sup>16</sup> and that Socrates, too, would have known about and practiced these methods, which likely included various meditative exercises, breathing techniques, visionary experiences, acts of memorization, and more.

Cooper’s own depiction of Socrates, then, is right in that “all that he knew, humbly, was how to reason and reflect” and that he did so without simple minded appeals to “social authority or the say-so of esteemed poets (or philosophers) or custom or any other kind of intellectual laziness,”<sup>17</sup> but his view is too limited, as it does not take on board the larger context of the Greek practicing life—especially as it relates to Socrates, who as I have already noted, partook in the mystery rites associated with Delphi—and these practices and rituals must also figure into our image of Socrates, without them then erasing or underplaying the importance of reason in this picture, which Cooper rightly emphasizes.

Rituals and religious traditions, on this view, must answer to reason; they cannot rely on simple appeals to authority, but this is very different from suggesting that carrying out the nonrational practices associated with these traditions have no value in terms of achieving philosophical insight; it means rather that they are, in their own senses, modes of discovery worth including in the philosophical life and should figure into a full assessment of Socratic practice.

It is these practices that fall within the larger orbit of *askēsis* and spiritual exercise. In other words, if philosophy and religion are viewed as practices, or as experimental and evolving modes of relating to and bringing forth the

---

<sup>14</sup> Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 180.

<sup>15</sup> Hadot here quotes Henri Joly regarding the validity of this question. See *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 186–187.

<sup>17</sup> Cooper, “Introduction to *Plato: Complete Works*,” xix.

world, then Cooper’s criticism faces problems, especially when we consider that doctrinal submission is not a problem unique to religious life. To escape this risk, Cooper says, “You must understand everything for yourself,”<sup>18</sup> an idea Hadot would readily support, but this mode of unthinking doctrinal submission—along with its associated ideological fundamentalism—is a risk present to all modes of human thought. It is not unique to religious or spiritual ones. Indeed, even the claims of reason must stay open to investigation by reason.

Nevertheless, Cooper holds to this position, and his skepticism of spiritual exercise is why he positions philosophy, rooted in reason, as “the steersman or pilot of a life.”<sup>19</sup> Even though Cooper is aware of the many psychological factors in human life that can manipulate or distort one’s thinking or reasoning at their sources, he does not feel that spiritual exercises play a corrective role here. Instead, for Cooper, the solution to any distortion of reason is simply the application of reason to error as a mode of course correction. Reason rights the ship when it steers off course, as it were. Cooper cites the Socrates of Plato’s *Protagoras* to exemplify this position, which can be stated as follows. Possession of knowledge or truth is alone sufficient for motivating right action and alleviating the risks of false opinion.<sup>20</sup> This claim is at once historical (it suggests a certain view of the origins of philosophy) and theoretical (it argues for a particular relation among reason, motivation, and action).

In positioning knowledge, achieved through reason, as the sole corrective for wrong action, Cooper rejects Hadot’s notion that choosing to live out a certain philosophy (Platonist or Stoic, say) is an existential choice. It is instead for Cooper simply a commitment “to living on the basis of philosophical reason.”<sup>21</sup> It may still be a way of life, as Hadot says, but it has little to do with spiritual exercise. In Cooper’s own words:

These nonrational practices that Hadot describes as “spiritual exercises”—meditation, self-exhortation, memorization, and recitation to oneself of bits of sacred text, causing in oneself devoted prayerful or prayer-like states of consciousness and mystical moments—had, and could have, at most a secondary

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 19.

and very derivative function in the philosophical life during the heyday of ancient philosophy.<sup>22</sup>

This, then, is the basis of Cooper’s theoretical disagreement with Hadot, which amounts to a rejection of the idea that spiritual exercise can be efficacious in the pursuit of greater truth and understanding, but Cooper’s criticism cuts deeper than this still. For Cooper, Hadot is not only wrong about the primacy of reason in philosophical life, he is not even correct to attribute spiritual exercise as a central feature of the historical periods he treats in his texts to begin with.

Indeed, Cooper disagrees with Hadot about the scope of the existential choice that is living philosophically, and he challenges the idea that so-called spiritual exercises figured strongly within ancient Greek philosophy at all. Cooper notes, for example, that Hadot’s phrase “spiritual exercise” is borrowed from St. Ignatius’s 16th century handbook of the same name, and that many of the exercises—meditative self-examination, in this case—Hadot describes as so central to philosophy do not arrive on the scene until at the earliest Seneca’s work *On Anger*, which was written in the first century CE, a full 500 years after the life of Socrates. Upon the basis of this argument, Cooper in his text will “leave aside altogether any consideration of spiritual exercises as forming a part of those [Socratic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Epicurean, and Pyrrhonian] lives”<sup>23</sup> that he studies. *Pursuits of Wisdoms* is thus a very different text from Hadot’s *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* and this distinction should be taken seriously.

If Cooper’s account is right, then there is good reason to think Hadot has simply read back into the history of ancient Greece a set of later post-Christian philosophies (Seneca’s, for example) using the tools of 16th century spiritual instruction (the vocabulary St. Ignatius) with the sensibilities of a 20th century mind (the framework of existentialism). Unfortunately, Hadot passed away two years prior to the publication of Cooper’s *Pursuits of Wisdom*, and so this dialogue must continue by other means. More fortunately, other scholar’s have taken up Cooper’s criticisms and refuted them, both on theoretical and historical grounds.

Grimm and Cohoe challenge Cooper’s historical claim that spiritual exercises played no role in what was in reality a purely reason-driven

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 22

philosophical landscape.<sup>24</sup> They also contest Cooper’s sense that reason alone is sufficient for overriding other human motivations and, more importantly, they question the view that reason by itself is sufficient for providing a “complete vision” of the good to begin with,<sup>25</sup> the implicit claim being that rituals, traditions, practices, arts, aesthetics, and so on do not have a role to play in our understanding of the good, or if they do, it is only a minor, derivative role that can be dispensed with.

In contrast, the authors show that the Epicureans, for example, exercised a therapeutic sense of philosophy, and engaged in practices of memorization, exhortation, and repetition, specifically as means of transformation.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, they note how Socrates regularly consulted with a *daimon*, “a private, inner, god-like voice” that advised him to take a course of action *even in cases where his own reasoning process suggested he do otherwise*.<sup>27</sup> The authors continue in their examples, foregrounding the Socratic distrust of reason found in *Phaedo*, the emphasis on care of the soul found in *Symposium*, the transformative role of gymnastics and music exhibited in *Republic*, and the view expressed in *Timaeus*, which suggests that, in the authors’ words, “Using our reason requires the proper preparatory exercises of both body and soul.”<sup>28</sup>

I will not continue to list the authors’ specific examples, though it is worthy of note that they proceed in this fashion through the works of Aristotle, the Stoics, and others. The point is, there is substantial evidence that these *psuché exercises* (soul exercises) were widespread in the ancient world,<sup>29</sup> and they demonstrate, contra Cooper, that these practices were not mere tertiary adjuncts to the primacy of reason but were themselves (and still are) primary elements of a whole philosophical life. This more integrated view evokes Sherman’s call to unite theory and *theoria* through contemplation, a union that makes available the deeper offerings of philosophy. I quote Sherman’s suggestive words, “The model of contemplative philosophy also suggests that when the intellect acts in concert with volition—that is, when the mind acts with the heart, or when theory and *theoria* coincide—it is

---

<sup>24</sup> Grim and Cohoe, “What Is Philosophy as a Way of Life?,” 1–16.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

capable of far more than we philosophers have yet understood.”<sup>30</sup> Reason, or theory, on this view, is only one piece within a larger image, an image that must be complemented with practice, volition, and contemplation, or *theoria*.

Hadot’s texts, which I will turn to more fully in chapter 3, are likewise filled with examples of philosophers throughout the Hellenistic, Roman, early and late Christian, medieval, modern, and contemporary periods engaging in spiritual exercise. There are, then, historical and textual reasons for rejecting Cooper’s version of ancient philosophy, but there are also practical ones that return our discussion to the relation between reason and action, and to the as yet unaddressed question regarding how reason might evaluate itself. (I will return to this second point at greater length in the following section.) Daniel del Nido has taken up this second line of inquiry, arguing against Cooper’s vision of philosophy as limited to the performance of reason. In contrast, del Nido reiterates Hadot’s and Sherman’s claims that reason and spiritual exercise go hand in hand in a mutually reinforcing way.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, in del Nido’s words, “Hadot makes a compelling case that living on the basis of reason is not only compatible with but in fact depends upon practices of self-transformation.”<sup>32</sup> Del Nido develops this line of thought by elaborating on what Hadot, following the Stoics, has called the inner *logos*, a term of art that refers to the inner commentary that accompanies the flow of sensory experience.<sup>33</sup> The inner *logos* on this Stoic account is an automatic set of verbalizations (*lekton*) formed about the impressions (*phantasiai*) incoming from the outer world. These verbalizations run parallel to an also automatic set of desires, both of which are laid down through habit, and, as del Nido observes, tend to resist submission to direct rational control. The inner *logos* issues value judgments that guide action, for better or worse, and in this sense it is not, technically speaking, a consciously executed mode of agency. It is, rather, a sedimented habit laid down through patterns of behavior and experience.

Del nido’s observation is simply that habits need correction through the cultivation of other habits, not merely propositional correctives issued by a reasoning mind. Because of its resistance to rational correction, spiritual exercises are needed to act on and re-shape the inner *logos* to achieve a

---

<sup>30</sup> Sherman, *Partakers of the Divine*, 38

<sup>31</sup> Del Nido, “Pierre Hadot on Habit, Reason, and Spiritual Exercises,” 7–36.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–10.

transformation of vision *through* a transformation of the philosopher's whole being. There is an active reciprocity here between reason and exercise that del Nido frames thusly: "The discursive practices typically associated with philosophy must be complemented by practices that integrate philosophical ideas into one's conduct, and spiritual exercises accomplish this work."<sup>34</sup>

In re-shaping the inner *logos* through practice, the philosopher acts upon the *sources* of his or her own thinking, feeling, and acting, where practice is a way of changing not only the contents of experience but also its very shape and contour. Del nido opens out this discussion into the broader landscape of practice that has inspired wisdom traditions the world over. Beyond the Stoic psychology Del nido draws from to counter Cooper's account of reason, one could add examinations of conscience, meditation, fasting, and therapy, in the philosophical sense,<sup>35</sup> as ways of acting upon oneself in the direction transformation.

This latter point, that philosophy is a type of therapy or medicine, is the view Martha Nussbaum has articulated with such precision in her work. The therapeutic sense of philosophy, properly understood, is not one wherein reason is opposed to therapy, where therapy is merely an amelioration of some psychological deficit and where reason enjoys a privileged epistemic status, but rather points to the nonnegotiable fact that the disorders for which philosophy is medicine—false beliefs, in this case—must be contended with if one is to attain a worthy epistemic point of view at all. In Nussbaum's words,

Philosophy heals human diseases, diseases produced by false beliefs. Its arguments are to the soul as the doctor's remedies are to the body. They can heal, and they are to be evaluated in terms of their power to heal. As the medical art makes progress on behalf of the suffering body, so philosophy for the soul in distress. Correctly understood, it is no less than the soul's art of life (*techné biou*).<sup>36</sup>

Through what Nussbaum calls *therapeutic arguments*, recovered is the sense that reason and logical rigor come together with a commitment to reducing suffering and enabling flourishing through the ameliorative

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>35</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*.

<sup>36</sup> Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 14.

practices that philosophers use to dispel the sources of false belief. The good and the true are joined through actions aimed at care that deal both in propositions and emotional well-being, rejecting the misguided binary that reasons and emotions are ultimately unrelated to one another, or that only one or the other are worthy of attention.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, Nussbaum is committed to raising this view, essential on her account to Hellenistic philosophy as a whole, that compassionate attitudes are philosophically indispensable in understanding and treating the complex interrelations among reasons, beliefs, emotions, and actions.<sup>38</sup> The epistemology of emotions Nussbaum offers here suggests a complex relation between emotions and perceptual knowledge.<sup>39</sup> Emotions, like reasons, on this account involve thought, judgement, and evaluation. In other words, emotions are wrapped up in our intentional awareness of things, they are *directed at* or *about* the objects of their attention. They are not simple physiological responses but assessments of a state of affairs, as more-or-less finely grained cognitions of things.<sup>40</sup>

On this basis, Nussbaum, like Cooper, suggests that Greek and Roman Stoicism is predicated on the transformation of our modes of intentionality through rational evaluation. “The Hellenistic thinkers see the goal of philosophy as a transformation of the inner world through the use of rational argument,” is how she puts it.<sup>41</sup> And yet, Nussbaum is clear that the work of transformation entailed herein is not best performed through the work of an unemotional, detached intellect but through our moral involvement, attention, and generosity, and this may be especially true of our involvement with other people. Sherman appraises Nussbaum on this point thusly, “Our knowledge of persons is a moral knowledge, a knowledge that can only be accessed under certain conditions and that, for this very reason, resists exhaustive propositional formulation.”<sup>42</sup>

Del nido and Nussbaum thus share the sense, on both psychological and textual grounds, that reason’s aims and performances must be understood within its larger and more complex relation to habits, sensations, feelings,

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 37–38.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>39</sup> Nussbaum, “Love’s Knowledge,” 269.

<sup>40</sup> Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 80–81.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>42</sup> Sherman, *Partakes of the Divine*, 242.

and beliefs. The point is, reason alone is a necessary but insufficient element for activating philosophical conversion, and for these reasons, I accept Hadot's vision of philosophy as a way of life over Cooper's. That is to say, the best account available suggests that philosophy, now and throughout history, is most faithfully expressed as a commitment to forms of life that include reason and spiritual exercise, theory and *theoria*, where both serve as a preparation for and complement to the other. The practices, rituals, prayers, aesthetics, and texts of the spiritual life are neither secondary to nor derivative in the philosophical life; they till the very soil within which the soul grows.

Stated in a more theoretically precise way, I would frame the relation between reason and spiritual exercise as follows. While reason evaluates and makes judgments about thoughts and emotions at the level of their content, spiritual exercises move to change thinking and feeling at their sources, shifting over time the quality and character of both in their moment-to-moment emergence. On this view, contemplative philosophy, rooted in spiritual exercise, views reason, itself a mode of practice in Cooper's and Nussbaum's senses, as nonetheless surrounded by and integrated within a set of concrete exercises that are nonconceptual and therapeutic in nature, which like reason deliver insight transformation. This fact is essential to all modes of philosophy, whatever their theoretical orientation, and this view is, at minimum, what Hadot means by treating philosophy as a way of life. However, the account I have given thus far still falls short of being truly philosophical in its lack of attention to metaphysics, on the hand, and its under formulation of the relation between *askēsis* and transformation. I turn next to these ideas.

## **The Primacy of Practice**

I have been arguing that in order to recover a robust vision of philosophy as a way of life, we must re-join those aspects of philosophical living captured by the phrase "spiritual exercise" with those acts associated with the works of reason. I have tried to make the case that reason and spiritual exercise are both required in the philosophical life, and that there is good textual and historical evidence for suggesting that ancient Greeks and Romans lived philosophically upon this dual basis. I now want to advance the discussion by turning attention not only to the necessity of developing philosophical practices in addition to those of reason, but also towards developing an account of reason and knowledge adequate to larger notions of epistemology, metaphysics, and morals.

It is not enough, on my view, to simply join reason and exercise to the aims of therapy or the recuperation of the passions, however laudable those aims

may be. They must also connect to the larger question of cosmology, to worldview, and this will require a transvaluation of reason itself. In a phrase, I want to argue against a reduction of philosophy to reason and reason to instrumentality. What I mean by this is that reason itself has undergone substantial evolution over the course of history, and just as I have set out to recover an ancient view of philosophy as a way of life rooted in *askēsis*, there is something of the ancient conception of reason that we would likewise do well to re-integrate today. Allow me to explain what I mean.

Max Weber showed in his famous study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that our notions of rationalism and asceticism have undergone substantial change and evolution throughout history, especially in the transition to the modern industrial world. In Weber's analysis, the shift from the other worldly asceticism of the Middle Ages and prior to the inner worldly asceticism of the Reformation and after corresponds with, and in many ways enabled, an increasingly narrow and utilitarian view of reason married to an increasingly mechanical and instrumental view of nature. The dissolution of these earlier asceticisms into a calculated efficiency program, executed for the sake of economic productivity alone that, while still connected to notions of God and a providential plan for humanity, nevertheless encouraged divestment from the communal and individual enrichment associated with traditional ascetic practices, social orderings, and philosophical expressions.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to the economic and cultural transformations that underpinned these shifting conceptions of reason and asceticism, the scientific revolution itself re-organized the space of epistemic possibilities. "There is a deep change," writes Charles Taylor, "in what it is to live according to nature which separates the eighteenth century from its ancient sources."<sup>44</sup> In what do these changes consist? To be sure, reason and nature maintain a privileged relation in this new image, but this relation is, as I noted above, an instrumental one wherein reason calculates its advantage in the terms of mechanical systems. I quote Taylor again, "Rationality is now an internal property of subjective thinking, rather than consisting in its vision of reality."<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic*, 120.

<sup>44</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 278.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

Gone is the deeper sense that contemplative practices also deliver insight into the nature of the real, and in a way that goes beyond the reductionism of the special sciences. In Taylor’s words, “Under the impact of the scientific revolution, the ideal of *theoria*, of grasping the order of the cosmos through contemplation, came to be seen as being vain and misguided, as a presumptuous attempt to escape the hard work of detailed discovery.”<sup>46</sup> Taylor here diagnosis a contradiction: The modern mind is committed to a science that reveals the world, including the biological world, as mechanism, while at the same time this mind is in search of moral and psychological sources of meaning that cannot find ground within the operations of this reductive image.

In a certain sense, as long as this image remains, the human arts of practice stay unmoored, unable to gain a substantive grasp within what Alfred North Whitehead called the bifurcation of nature.<sup>47</sup> The result of this image is stark: On this view, the practices I have been discussing—contemplation, self-examination, philosophical therapy, training of the senses, and so on—may have some limited subjective psychological benefit for the individual, but they cannot cross into the domain of knowledge about the world. This is how contemplation becomes a “pious ornament of a beautiful soul, sentimental and subjective” and how philosophy “is made banal, desacralized, and alien from the wonder that is its *raison d’être*,” to repeat Sherman’s words once more. In contrast, the image I am looking to uphold contains a more substantive view of practice. As Sherman states elsewhere, “It is not just that philosophy ought to add a practical or spiritual component alongside its theoretic activities but, rather, that practices of transformation mediate and secure important aspects of philosophical discovery. The two go hand in hand.”<sup>48</sup>

There is not room here to elaborate fully on Weber’s and Taylor’s insights, nor is my intention to suggest that these transitions are in anyway simple or total. Exceptions and qualifications abound, and what I have represented here all to briefly is in reality a much larger and more complex history of transformation. My point is merely to indicate that a shift has occurred—a shift that Taylor marks as one “from substance to procedure, from found to constructed orders”<sup>49</sup>—and that the conversation cannot proceed further without marking the influence this shift has had on modern conceptions of

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>47</sup> Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*.

<sup>48</sup> Sherman, *Partakers of the Divine*, 207.

<sup>49</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 156.

reason, epistemology, and practice. My larger aim, then, is to continue the task of rehabilitating the role of spiritual exercise within the world of philosophical life, and then to deepen our available conceptions of what reason is in itself, as it relates to contemplation.

The question is this, Is Nature understandable in reason's terms alone? Or is reason not a particular structure, a shape of thought, that conditions the objects of its inquiry into its own image? This is the point Immanuel Kant laid before us: Reason constructs an image of the world that it alone can process by means of its own resources, and this image imposes a strong limit on what theoretical understanding can know about the world in itself.<sup>50</sup> This circularity in the belief of reason as the only arbiter of knowledge, of this knowledge as the only way to truth, and of truth as delimited by what reason can count as knowledge is both Kant's great advance and the prison he imposed on experience.

The way out of the circle, I suggest, is to see that there are many more ways of getting in touch with the real than this image of reason implies, and that those ways are paved by modes of relating already structured by and related to the world we see seek to know. We should think of philosophy as including all these modes (spiritual, religious, visionary, discursive, athletic, conceptual, moral, and more), as each an important part of the "core" of what philosophy as a way of life really means. Spiritual exercise should not be understood here as an ornament or decoration around which the primary work of reason revolves. Instead, *askēsis* should be seen as an activity that yields cognitive content of its own, to borrow the language of John Cottingham.<sup>51</sup> This cognitive content can in turn be expressed, however partially, in discursive terms, in other words, as a set of propositional claims that can then be evaluated on the basis of their truth or falsity by a community of adept practitioners.

Beyond offering a conceptual or linguistic basis for evaluating the deliverances of practice, Cottingham continues, practice invites insights properly construed as metaphysical. This is metaphysics in a realist, as opposed to merely conceptual, mode. The realist claim is that the self-referential loop of thinking fenced in by its own categorical closure—the Kantian observation I noted above that says, to have a thought about any phenomenon whatsoever is to turn that phenomenon into a mental representation reduced to thought's own terms rather than set as an open encounter with the thing-in-itself—can be pierced from the inside. After all,

---

<sup>50</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.

<sup>51</sup> Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, 103.

human knowledge and our means of generating it are alike in that both are expressions that issue forth from the very world they try to describe. To speak in clichéd terms, human beings are the world's own expression of itself. Investigations into human interiority are not other than investigations into the rest of nature. The inside leads back out. But how? I will offer a few options, drawing again from Sherman's work.

Sherman distinguishes among three interpretations of practice, or what he calls the liberal, postliberal, and participatory views, each with rival epistemic and metaphysical orientations.<sup>52</sup> The liberal view takes its point of orientation from the Kantian philosophical tradition.<sup>53</sup> In this Kantian image, reason knows only what it can experience and it is only able to experience that which it also constructs through schematizations, categories, and concepts. Reason pulls experience out of itself, making it so that we can only experience that which we produce, and we can only produce that which is like us. Kant's transcendental idealism suggests that the shape of this cognition is universal, so that all humans share in one formal structure of thinking, a move that universalizes the necessity of concepts and categories, but purchases their universality at a high cost—knowledge of the world as it exists apart from our schemas.

The postliberal view shares with the liberal view a sense for the constructed nature of all possible experience, but jettisons the universal character of the perceiving subject's schemas and categories.<sup>54</sup> This sociolinguistic subject is likewise a kind of constructivist about practice, but in this account the transcendental status of the thinking subject is removed. The constructions of experience this type of thinking produces are like the subjects who produce them—transient, contingent, and accidental. This view understands thought as embedded in and dependent upon diverse languages linked to equally disparate and diverse forms of life, to the grammatical rules that issue forth and are agreed upon by different communities of language-using groups, groups that grow increasingly smaller and smaller as their specificity increases.

Finally, the participatory view—from *metaxu* (the middle) or *methexis* (participation)—offers an alternative image to both the liberal and postliberal approaches.<sup>55</sup> Participation does not offer a return to the naïve

---

<sup>52</sup> Sherman, *Partakers of the Divine*, 225–251.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 225–234.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 235–241.

realism or positivism of an “uninterpreted reality” but issues a vision wherein the world itself is generative of theory (as *theoria*). On this view, our own practicing contemplative attitude is an outgrowth and an expression of the world through which the practicing subject turns on itself to contemplate itself. The liberal and the postliberal turns to practice—or the modern and the postmodern—eliminate access to the above (the transrational) and the below (the pretheoretical), creating an aporia of an absolutized self-mediating subject cut off from both realms.

In contrast, the participatory view treats the practitioner as already immersed in a world that draws him or her forward, as ordered by its ordering, pulled by its momentum, and challenged by its recalcitrance. Sherman’s point of departure is that, prior to thinking, the self is essentially and genetically related to the world. “We need an account of the self as subsistent but internally related to that which precedes, encompasses, and transcends it,” is how he puts it.<sup>56</sup> Internally related to that which precedes, sustains, and transcends the self, the philosopher engages practices that open the self up to subtler levels of relationship. It is within this participatory view that I situate my reading of *askēsis*. The philosopher practices from the middle.

It is practice itself, then, that offers resources for intervening in one’s own categorical closure and can, at least partially, generate *understanding* purchased through practical experience and engagement in a way that routes the circuitous pathways of knowledge, concept, and reason. In Cottingham’s words, “metaphysical truth may outrun the domain of possible knowledge.”<sup>57</sup> If this statement is true—that truth is deeper than knowledge, and I think it is—then philosophers must hold onto their larger repertoire of practices in order to fulfill their commitment as pursuers of wisdom, not simply as the acquisition of knowledge, but as the search of transformation and deepening connection.

The shift in thinking is this. Philosophical and contemplative practices deliver insights the truth value of which should not be evaluated exclusively at the level of the sentences that express them, but also from out of the modes of transformation that allow them to be perceived and then communicated in the first place. *Askēsis* on Cottingham’s account is thus prior to distinctions between philosophy, religion, and spirituality, and also prior to distinctions between psychology and aesthetics. It acts on

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>57</sup> Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, 119.

epistemic, moral, and theoretic fronts and is prior to all three domains.<sup>58</sup> *Askēsis* is best understood in these terms as a *catalyst* for spiritual belief and understanding, rather than as a representation of them. *Askēsis* bears “the epistemic fruits” of spirituality.<sup>59</sup>

As I said before, what is at stake in this debate is no simple repudiation of reason—nor is the aim to insert a simple hierarchy between theory and practice, nor to argue that an analysis of our concepts, vocabulary, and grammar is mistaken, unneeded, or without its own profound value. The real crux is rather a view of the world’s richness and depth itself, which, I am arguing here, can be understood in ways that cannot be spoken of or brought forth in terms of propositions alone but need the variegated textures of art, contemplation, religion, and spirituality to be faithfully rendered, brought into view, and shared by practitioners transformed by their pursuit.

Given their shared roots, it is no surprise that debates over the role of *askēsis* in practice emerge in both philosophy and religion. I am thinking here specifically of Cottingham’s account of the philosophy of religion, and the important, if not defining, role that *askēsis* plays within it.<sup>60</sup> 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).”<sup>61</sup> 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 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.”<sup>62</sup>

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

---

<sup>58</sup> Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, 150–152.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>60</sup> Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

completed on a particular day, or even over a single season, but is thought of as a lifelong process.”<sup>63</sup> 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.”<sup>64</sup> As with many other instances of *askēsis* I have described, the practices Cottingham concerns himself with include acts of privation (e.g., fasting), but ultimately go beyond them. *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.’”<sup>65</sup>

This practical programme of training is precisely what Cottingham finds missing from the modern curriculum of philosophy. Michel 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.<sup>66</sup> 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, a point where evidence replaces *askēsis* as the primary object of knowledge.

At this stage, according to Foucault, “the history of truth enters its modern period” and truth becomes associated with knowledge (*connaissance*, in the French), rather than with the efforts of a practicing subject.<sup>67</sup> This moment marks a shift in definitions of truth understood as practice (*askēsis*), or as the “return effect” of truth encounters, and towards truth understood as proposition (*mathemata*).<sup>68</sup> In other words, the *askēsis* long required of the person who wants to know is on this view replaced with a subject who can merely acquire knowledge without needing to make any effort to transform themselves, either in the direction of the good or in any other way.

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 14–17.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>68</sup> McGushin, *Foucault’s Askēsis*, 55

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. "Concerning these *Meditations*," writes Hadot, "Descartes advises his readers to dedicate a number of months, or at least a number of weeks, to 'meditate' the first and second meditations . . . This clearly shows that for Descartes also 'evidence' can only be recognized on the basis of a spiritual exercise."<sup>69</sup>

This notion, that evidentiary claims require philosophical transformation gained through spiritual exercise in order to be understood, is in many ways the same claim that I have been defending throughout this chapter, and Descartes, his contemporary caricature aside for a moment, here exemplifies this ideal. And yet there is a sense where, if not by name, the "Cartesian moment" does mark a shift away from, on the one hand, the reduction of philosophy to something like propositional knowledge and argumentation alone, learned and memorized without requiring a change in the subject, and on the other, the reduction of practices of transformation to simple-minded self-improvement regimes, perhaps beneficial in a physical or psychological sense, but robbed of their epistemic, and so metaphysical, validity as drivers and catalysts of philosophical insight, conversion, or rupture.

As we have seen, Hadot cites the rise of the European university system as one reason for the shift away from practice in philosophy,<sup>70</sup> but Cottingham has an additional angle worth considering, related to the ascension of the mechanical view of nature, and so of human beings, a view that likewise will influence the role and necessity of practice in human philosophical life, making it an entirely instrumental endeavor. While Hadot is right to say that Descartes's meditations should be read as a series of spiritual exercises, as an *askēsis* of self-transformation, Descartes, in Cottingham's reading, will in the end advocate 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

---

<sup>69</sup> Hadot, *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot*, 232.

<sup>70</sup> Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy*.

toward more healthy and more worthy objects?”<sup>71</sup> Descartes on Cottingham’s telling is not advocating for a replacement of *askēsis* with evidence per se, but rather for editing the biological system using technological means 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.”<sup>72</sup>

Philosophy cannot be reduced to such instrumental ends. It is not compatible with putatively Cartesian shortcuts. *Askēsis*, and the transformation it enables, is embedded in the practice of practice itself. There is no shortcutting the repetition, endurance, and commitment needed of 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.<sup>73</sup>

Today we are swimming in these seductive fantasies; they are all a sham. 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. Surrounded by their advanced technologies, they still will practice, for there is no other way to achieve philosophical conversion, and when hurtling through all that dark, shining vastness, conversion is what they will need.

---

<sup>71</sup> Cottingham, “Philosophy and Self-Improvement,” 161.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 163.