3

Spiritual Exercises

To take flight every day! At least for a moment, which may be brief, as long as it is intense. A "spiritual exercise" every day – either alone, or in the company of someone who also wishes to better himself. Spiritual exercises. Step out of duration . . . try to get rid of your own passions, vanities, and the itch for talk about your own name, which sometimes burns you like a chronic disease. Avoid backbiting. Get rid of pity and hatred. Love all free human beings. Become eternal by transcending yourself.

This work on yourself is necessary; this ambition justified. Lots of people let themselves be wholly absorbed by militant politics and the preparation for social revolution. Rare, much more rare, are they who, in order to prepare for the revolution, are willing to make themselves worthy of it.

With the exception of the last few lines, doesn’t this text look like a pastiche of Marcus Aurelius? It is by Georges Friedmann,¹ and it is quite possible that, when he wrote it, the author was not aware of the resemblance. Moreover, in the rest of his book, in which he seeks a place “to re-source himself,”² he comes to the conclusion that there is no tradition – be it Jewish, Christian, or Oriental – compatible with contemporary spiritual demands. Curiously, however, he does not ask himself about the value of the philosophical tradition of Greco-Roman antiquity, although the lines we have just quoted show to just what extent ancient tradition continues – albeit unconsciously – to live within him, as it does within each of us.

“Spiritual exercises.” The expression is a bit disconcerting for the contemporary reader. In the first place, it is no longer quite fashionable these days to use the word “spiritual.” It is nevertheless necessary to use this term, I believe, because none of the other adjectives we could use – “psychic,” “moral,” “ethical,” “intellectual,” “of thought,” “of the soul” – covers all the aspects of the reality we want to describe. Since, in these exercises, it is thought which, as it were, takes itself as its own subject-matter,³ and seeks to
modify itself, it would be possible for us to speak in terms of "thought exercises." Yet the word "thought" does not indicate clearly enough that imagination and sensibility play a very important role in these exercises. For the same reason, we cannot be satisfied with "intellectual exercises," although such intellectual factors as definition, division, ratiocination, reading, investigation, and rhetorical amplification play a large role in them. "Ethical exercises" is a rather tempting expression, since, as we shall see, the exercises in question contribute in a powerful way to the therapeutics of the passions, and have to do with the conduct of life. Yet, here again, this would be too limited a view of things. As we can glimpse through Friedmann's text, these exercises in fact correspond to a transformation of our vision of the world, and to a metamorphosis of our personality. The word "spiritual" is quite apt to make us understand that these exercises are the result, not merely of thought, but of the individual's entire psychosis. Above all, the word "spiritual" reveals the true dimensions of these exercises. By means of them, the individual raises himself up to the life of the objective Spirit; that is to say, he re-places himself within the perspective of the Whole ("Become eternal by transcending yourself").

Here our reader may say, "All right, we'll accept the expression 'spiritual exercises'. But are we talking about Ignatius of Loyola's Exercitia spiritualia?" What relationship is there between Ignatian meditations and Friedmann's program of "stepping out of duration . . . becoming eternal by transcending oneself?" Our reply, quite simply, is that Ignatius' Exercitia spiritualia are nothing but a Christian version of a Greco-Roman tradition, the extent of which we hope to demonstrate in what follows. In the first place, both the idea and the terminology of exercitium spirituale are attested in early Latin Christianity, well before Ignatius of Loyola, and they correspond to the Greek Christian term askesis. In turn, askesis — which must be understood not as asceticism, but as the practice of spiritual exercises — already existed within the philosophical tradition of antiquity. In the final analysis, it is to antiquity that we must return in order to explain the origin and significance of this idea of spiritual exercises, which, as Friedmann's example shows, is still alive in contemporary consciousness.

The goal of the present chapter is not merely to draw attention to the existence of spiritual exercises in Greco-Latin antiquity, but above all to delimit the scope and importance of the phenomenon, and to show the consequences which it entails for the understanding not only of ancient thought, but of philosophy itself.

1 Learning to Live

Spiritual exercises can be best observed in the context of Hellenistic and Roman schools of philosophy. The Stoics, for instance, declared explicitly
that philosophy, for them, was an “exercise.” In their view, philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory—much less in the exegesis of texts—but rather in the art of living. It is a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence. The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a process which causes us to be more fully, and makes us better. It is a conversion which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it. It raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom.

In the view of all philosophical schools, mankind’s principal cause of suffering, disorder, and unconsciousness were the passions: that is, unregulated desires and exaggerated fears. People are prevented from truly living, it was taught, because they are dominated by worries. Philosophy thus appears, in the first place, as a therapeutic of the passions (in the words of Friedmann: “Try to get rid of your own passions”). Each school had its own therapeutic method, but all of them linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the individual’s mode of seeing and being. The object of spiritual exercises is precisely to bring about this transformation.

To begin with, let us consider the example of the Stoics. For them, all mankind’s woes derive from the fact that he seeks to acquire or to keep possessions that he may either lose or fail to obtain, and from the fact that he tries to avoid misfortunes which are often inevitable. The task of philosophy, then, is to educate people, so that they seek only the goods they are able to obtain, and try to avoid only those evils which it is possible to avoid. In order for something good to be always obtainable, or an evil always avoidable, they must depend exclusively on man’s freedom; but the only things which fulfill these conditions are moral good and evil. They alone depend on us; everything else does not depend on us. Here, “everything else,” which does not depend on us, refers to the necessary linkage of cause and effect, which is not subject to our freedom. It must be indifferent to us: that is, we must not introduce any differences into it, but accept it in its entirety, as willed by fate. This is the domain of nature.

We have here a complete reversal of our usual way of looking at things. We are to switch from our “human” vision of reality, in which our values depend on our passions, to a “natural” vision of things, which replaces each event within the perspective of universal nature.

Such a transformation of vision is not easy, and it is precisely here that spiritual exercises come in. Little by little, they make possible the indispensable metamorphosis of our inner self.

No systematic treatise codifying the instructions and techniques for spiritual exercises has come down to us. However, allusions to one or the
other of such inner activities are very frequent in the writings of the Roman and Hellenistic periods. It thus appears that these exercises were well known, and that it was enough to allude to them, since they were a part of daily life in the philosophical schools. They took their place within a traditional course of oral instruction.

Thanks to Philo of Alexandria, however, we do possess two lists of spiritual exercises. They do not completely overlap, but they do have the merit of giving us a fairly complete panorama of Stoico-Platonic inspired philosophical therapeutics. One of these lists enumerates the following elements: research (zetesis), thorough investigation (skepsis), reading (anagnnosis), listening (akroasis), attention (prosoche), self-mastery (enkratieia), and indifference to different things. The other names successively: reading, meditations (meletai), therapies of the passions, remembrance of good things, self-mastery (enkratieia), and the accomplishment of duties. With the help of these lists, we shall be able to give a brief description of Stoic spiritual exercises. We shall study the following groups in succession: first attention, then meditations and "remembrances of good things," then the more intellectual exercises: reading, listening, research, and investigation, and finally the more active exercises: self-mastery, accomplishment of duties, and indifference to different things.

Attention (prosoche) is the fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude. It is a continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self-consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit. Thanks to this attitude, the philosopher is fully aware of what he does at each instant, and he wills his actions fully. Thanks to his spiritual vigilance, the Stoic always has "at hand" (procheiron) the fundamental rule of life: that is, the distinction between what depends on us and what does not. As in Epicureanism, so for Stoicism: it is essential that the adepts be supplied with a fundamental principle which is formulable in a few words, and extremely clear and simple, precisely so that it may remain easily accessible to the mind, and be applicable with the sureness and constancy of a reflex. "You must not separate yourself from these general principles; don't sleep, eat, drink, or converse with other men without them." It is this vigilance of the spirit which lets us apply the fundamental rule to each of life's particular situations, and always to do what we do "appropriately." We could also define this attitude as "concentration on the present moment":

Everywhere and at all times, it is up to you to rejoice piously at what is occurring at the present moment, to conduct yourself with justice towards the people who are present here and now, and to apply rules of discernment to your present representations, so that nothing slips in that is not objective.

Attention to the present moment is, in a sense, the key to spiritual exercises. It frees us from the passions, which are always caused by the past or the
future⁹ — two areas which do not depend on us. By encouraging concentration on the minuscule present moment, which, in its exiguity, is always bearable and controllable,⁰ attention increases our vigilance. Finally, attention to the present moment allows us to accede to cosmic consciousness, by making us attentive to the infinite value of each instant,¹¹ and causing us to accept each moment of existence from the viewpoint of the universal law of the cosmos.

Attention (prosoche) allows us to respond immediately to events, as if they were questions asked of us all of a sudden.¹² In order for this to be possible, we must always have the fundamental principles “at hand” (procheiron).¹³ We are to steep ourselves in the rule of life (kanon),¹⁴ by mentally applying it to all life’s possible different situations, just as we assimilate a grammatical or mathematical rule through practice, by applying it to individual cases. In this case, however, we are not dealing with mere knowledge, but with the transformation of our personality.

We must also associate our imagination and affectivity with the training of our thought. Here, we must bring into play all the psychagogic techniques and rhetorical methods of amplification.¹⁵ We must formulate the rule of life to ourselves in the most striking and concrete way. We must keep life’s events “before our eyes,”¹⁶ and see them in the light of the fundamental rule. This is known as the exercise of memorization (mneme)¹⁷ and meditation (melete)¹⁸ on the rule of life.

The exercise of meditation¹⁹ allows us to be ready at the moment when an unexpected — and perhaps dramatic — circumstance occurs. In the exercise called praemeditatio malorum,²⁰ we are to represent to ourselves poverty, suffering, and death. We must confront life’s difficulties face to face, remembering that they are not evils, since they do not depend on us. This is why we must engrave striking maxims in our memory,²¹ so that, when the time comes, they can help us accept such events, which are, after all, part of the course of nature; we will thus have these maxims and sentences “at hand.”²² What we need are persuasive formulae or arguments (epilogismoi),²³ which we can repeat to ourselves in difficult circumstances, so as to check movements of fear, anger, or sadness.

First thing in the morning, we should go over in advance what we have to do during the course of the day, and decide on the principles which will guide and inspire our actions.²⁴ In the evening, we should examine ourselves again, so as to be aware of the faults we have committed or the progress we have made.²⁵ We should also examine our dreams.²⁶

As we can see, the exercise of meditation is an attempt to control inner discourse, in an effort to render it coherent. The goal is to arrange it around a simple, universal principle: the distinction between what does and does not depend on us, or between freedom and nature. Whoever wishes to make progress strives, by means of dialogue with himself²⁷ or with others,²⁸ as well as by writing,²⁹ to “carry on his reflections in due order”³⁰ and finally to arrive
at a complete transformation of his representation of the world, his inner climate, and his outer behavior. These methods testify to a deep knowledge of the therapeutic powers of the world.51

The exercise of meditation and memorization requires nourishment. This is where the more specifically intellectual exercises, as enumerated by Philo, come in: reading, listening, research, and investigation. It is a relatively simple matter to provide food for meditation: one could read the sayings of the poets and philosophers, for instance, or the apophthegmata.52 "Reading," however, could also include the explanation of specifically philosophical texts, works written by teachers in philosophical schools. Such texts could be read or heard within the framework of the philosophical instruction given by a professor.53 Fortified by such instruction, the disciple would be able to study with precision the entire speculative edifice which sustained and justified the fundamental rule, as well as all the physical and logical research of which this rule was the summary.54 "Research" and "investigation" were the result of putting instruction into practice. For example, we are to get used to defining objects and events from a physical point of view, that is, we must picture them as they are when situated within the cosmic Whole.55 Alternatively, we can divide or dissect events in order to recognize the elements into which they can be reduced.56

Finally, we come to the practical exercises, intended to create habits. Some of these are very much "interior," and very close to the thought exercises we have just discussed. "Indifference to indifferent things," for example, was nothing other than the application of the fundamental rule.57 Other exercises, such as self-mastery and fulfilling the duties of social life, entailed practical forms of behavior. Here again, we encounter Friedmann's themes: "Try to get rid of your own passions, vanities, and the itch for talk about your own name . . . Avoid backbiting. Get rid of pity and hatred. Love all free human beings."

There are a large number of treatises relating to these exercises in Plutarch: On Restraining Anger, On Peace of Mind, On Brotherly Love, On the Love of Children, On Garrulity, On the Love of Wealth, On False Shame, On Envy and Hatred. Seneca also composed works of the same genre: On Anger, On Benefits, On Peace of Mind, On Leisure. In this kind of exercise, one very simple principle is always recommended: begin practicing on easier things, so as gradually to acquire a stable, solid habit.58

For the Stoic, then, doing philosophy meant practicing how to "live": that is, how to live freely and consciously. Consciously, in that we pass beyond the limits of individuality, to recognize ourselves as a part of the reason-animated cosmos. Freely, in that we give up desiring that which does not depend on us and is beyond our control, so as to attach ourselves only to what depends on us: actions which are just and in conformity with reason.

It is easy to understand that a philosophy like Stoicism, which requires vigilance, energy, and psychic tension, should consist essentially in spiritual
exercises. But it will perhaps come as a surprise to learn than Epicureanism, usually considered the philosophy of pleasure, gives just as prominent a place as Stoicism to precise practices which are nothing other than spiritual exercises. The reason for this is that, for Epicurus just as much as for the Stoics, philosophy is a therapeutics: "We must concern ourselves with the healing of our own lives." In this context, healing consists in bringing one's soul back from the worries of life to the simple joy of existing. People's unhappiness, for the Epicureans, comes from the fact that they are afraid of things which are not to be feared, and desire things which it is not necessary to desire, and which are beyond their control. Consequently, their life is consumed in worries over unjustified fears and unsatisfied desires. As a result, they are deprived of the only genuine pleasure there is: the pleasure of existing. This is why Epicurean physics can liberate us from fear: it can show us that the gods have no effect on the progress of the world and that death, being complete dissolution, is not a part of life. Epicurean ethics: Epicurean, as deliverance from desires can deliver us from our insatiable desires, by distinguishing between desires which are both natural and necessary, desires which are natural but not necessary, and desires which are neither natural nor necessary. It is enough to satisfy the first category of desires, and give up the last – and eventually the second as well – in order to ensure the absence of worries, and to reveal the sheer joy of existing: "The cries of the flesh are: 'Not to be hungry', 'not to be thirsty', 'not to be cold'. For if one enjoys the possession of this, and the hope of continuing to possess it, he might rival even Zeus in happiness." This is the source of the feeling of gratitude, which one would hardly have expected, which illuminates what one might call Epicurean piety towards all things: "Thanks be to blessed Nature, that she has made what is necessary easy to obtain, and what is not easy unnecessary."

Spiritual exercises are required for the healing of the soul. Like the Stoics, the Epicureans advise us to meditate upon and assimilate, "day and night," brief aphorisms or summaries which will allow us to keep the fundamental dogmas "at hand." For instance, there is the well-known tetrapharmakos, or four-fold healing formula: "God presents no fears, death no worries. And while good is readily attainable, evil is readily endurable." The abundance of collections of Epicurean aphorisms is a response to the demands of the spiritual exercise of meditation. As with the Stoics, however, the study of the dogmatic treatises of the school's great founders was also an exercise intended to provide material for meditation, so as more thoroughly to impregnate the soul with the fundamental intuitions of Epicureanism.

The study of physics is a particularly important spiritual exercise: "we should not think that any other end is served by knowledge of celestial phenomena . . . than freedom from disturbance and firm confidence, just as in the other fields of study." Contemplation of the physical world and
imagination of the infinite are important elements of Epicurean physics. Both can bring about a complete change in our way of looking at things. The universe is infinitely dilated, and we derive from this spectacle a unique spiritual pleasure:

the walls of the world open out, I see action going on throughout the void, . . . Thereupon from all these things a sort of divine delight gets hold upon me and a shuddering, because nature thus by your power (i.e. Epicurus') has been so manifestly laid open and unveiled in every part.  

Meditation, however, be it simple or erudite, is not the only Epicurean spiritual exercise. To cure the soul, it is not necessary, as the Stoics would have it, to train it to stretch itself tight, but rather to train it to relax. Instead of picturing misfortunes in advance, so as to be prepared to bear them, we must rather, say the Epicureans, detach our thought from the vision of painful things, and fix our eyes on pleasurable ones. We are to relive memories of past pleasures, and enjoy the pleasures of the present, recognizing how intense and agreeable these present pleasures are. We have here a quite distinctive spiritual exercise, different from the constant vigilance of the Stoic, with his constant readiness to safeguard his moral liberty at each instant. Instead, Epicureanism preaches the deliberate, continually renewed choice of relaxation and serenity, combined with a profound gratitude toward nature and life, which constantly offer us joy and pleasure, if only we know how to find them.

By the same token, the spiritual exercise of trying to live in the present moment is very different for Stoics and Epicureans. For the former, it means mental tension and constant wakefulness of the moral conscience; for the latter, it is, as we have seen, an invitation to relaxation and serenity. Worry, which tears us in the direction of the future, hides from us the incomparable value of the simple fact of existing: "We are born once, and cannot be born twice, but for all time must be no more. But you, who are not master of tomorrow, postpone your happiness: life is wasted in procrastination and each one of us dies overwhelmed with cares." This is the doctrine contained in Horace's famous saying: carpe diem.

Life ebbs as I speak:
so seize each day, and grant the next no credit.

For the Epicureans, in the last analysis, pleasure is a spiritual exercise. Not pleasure in the form of mere sensual gratification, but the intellectual pleasure derived from contemplating nature, the thought of pleasures past and present, and lastly the pleasure of friendship. In Epicurean communities, friendship
also had its spiritual exercises, carried out in a joyous, relaxed atmosphere. These include the public confession of one’s faults, mutual correction, carried out in a fraternal spirit; and examining one’s conscience. Above all, friendship itself was, as it were, the spiritual exercise par excellence: “Each person was to tend towards creating the atmosphere in which hearts could flourish. The main goal was to be happy, and mutual affection and the confidence with which they relied upon each other contributed more than anything else to this happiness.”

2 Learning to Dialogue

The practice of spiritual exercises is likely to be rooted in traditions going back to immemorial times. It is, however, the figure of Socrates that causes them to emerge into Western consciousness, for this figure was, and has remained, the living call to awaken our moral consciousness. We ought not to forget that this call sounded forth within a specific form: that of dialogue.

In the “Socratic” dialogue, the question truly at stake is not what is being talked about, but who is doing the talking.

anyone who is close to Socrates and enters into conversation with him is liable to be drawn into an argument, and whatever subject he may start, he will be continually carried round and round by him, until at last he finds that he has to give an account both of his present and past life, and when he is once entangled, Socrates will not let him go until he has completely and thoroughly sifted him... And I think there is no harm in being reminded of any wrong thing which we are, or have been, doing; he who does not run away from criticism will be sure to take more heed of his afterlife.

In a “Socratic” dialogue, Socrates’ interlocutor does not learn anything, and Socrates has no intention of teaching him anything. He repeats, moreover, to all who are willing to listen, that the only thing he knows is that he does not know anything. Yet, like an indefatigable horsefly, Socrates harassed his interlocutors with questions which put themselves into question, forcing them to pay attention to and take care of themselves.

My very good friend, you are an Athenian, and belong to a city which is the greatest and most famous in the world for its wisdom and strength. Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honour, and give no attention or thought to truth [aletheia] or thought [phronesis] or the perfection of your soul [psyche]?
Socrates' mission consisted in inviting his contemporaries to examine their conscience, and to take care for their inner progress:

I did not care for the things that most people care about — making money, having a comfortable home, high military or civil rank, and all the other activities, political appointments, secret societies, party organizations, which go on in our city... I set myself to do you — each one of you, individually and in private — what I hold to be the greatest possible service. I tried to persuade each one of you to concern himself less with what he has than with what he is, so as to render himself as excellent and as rational as possible.87

In Plato's Symposium, Alcibiades describes the effect made on him by dialogues with Socrates in the following terms: "this latter-day Marsyas, here, has often left me in such a state of mind that I've felt I simply couldn't go on living the way I did... He makes me admit that while I'm spending my time on politics, I am neglecting all the things that are crying for attention in myself."88

Thus, the Socratic dialogue turns out to be a kind of communal spiritual exercise. In it, the interlocutors are invited89 to participate in such inner spiritual exercises as examination of conscience and attention to oneself; in other words, they are urged to comply with the famous dictum, "Know thyself." Although it is difficult to be sure of the original meaning of this formula, this much is clear: it invites us to establish a relationship of the self to the self, which constitutes the foundation of every spiritual exercise. To know oneself means, among other things, to know oneself qua non-sage: that is, not as a sophos, but as a philo-sophos, someone on the way toward wisdom. Alternatively, it can mean to know oneself in one's essential being; this entails separating that which we are not from that which we are. Finally, it can mean to know oneself in one's true moral state: that is, to examine one's conscience.90

If we can trust the portrait sketched by Plato and Aristophanes, Socrates, master of dialogue with others, was also a master of dialogue with himself, and, therefore, a master of the practice of spiritual exercises. He is portrayed as capable of extraordinary mental concentration. He arrives late at Agathon's banquet, for example, because "as we went along the road, Socrates directed his intellect towards himself, and began to fall behind."91 Alcibiades tells the story of how, during the expedition against Poteidaia, Socrates remained standing all day and all night, "lost in thought."92 In his Clouds, Aristophanes seems to allude to these same Socratic habits:

Now, think hard and cogitate; spin round in every way as you concentrate. If you come up against an insoluble point, jump to another
Now don't keep your mind always spinning around itself, but let your thoughts out into the air a bit, like a may-beetle tied by its foot.\textsuperscript{93}

Meditation – the practice of dialogue with oneself – seems to have held a place of honor among Socrates’ disciples. When Antisthenes was asked what profit he had derived from philosophy, he replied: “The ability to converse with myself.”\textsuperscript{94} The intimate connection between dialogue with others and dialogue with oneself is profoundly significant. Only he who is capable of a genuine encounter with the other is capable of an authentic encounter with himself, and the converse is equally true. Dialogue can be genuine only within the framework of presence to others and to oneself. From this perspective, every spiritual exercise is a dialogue, insofar as it is an exercise of authentic presence, to oneself and to others.\textsuperscript{95}

The borderline between “Socratic” and “Platonic” dialogue is impossible to delimit. Yet the Platonic dialogue is always “Socratic” in inspiration, because it is an intellectual, and, in the last analysis, a “spiritual” exercise. This characteristic of the Platonic dialogue needs to be emphasized.

Platonic dialogues are model exercises. They are models, in that they are not transcriptions of real dialogues, but literary compositions which present an ideal dialogue. And they are exercises precisely insofar as they are dialogues: we have already seen, \textit{apropos} of Socrates, the dialectical character of all spiritual exercises. A dialogue is an itinerary of the thought, whose route is traced by the constantly maintained accord between questioner and respondent. In opposing his method to that of eristics, Plato strongly emphasizes this point:

When two friends, like you and I, feel like talking, we have to go about it in a gentler and more dialectical way. “More dialectical,” it seems to me, means that we must not merely give true responses, but that we must base our replies only on that which our interlocutor admits that he himself knows.\textsuperscript{96}

The dimension of the interlocutor is, as we can see, of capital importance. It is what prevents the dialogue from becoming a theoretical, dogmatic exposé, and forces it to be a concrete, practical exercise. For the point is not to set forth a doctrine, but rather to guide the interlocutor towards a determinate mental attitude. It is a combat, amicable but real.

The point is worth stressing, for the same thing happens in every spiritual exercise: we must \textit{let} ourselves be changed, in our point of view, attitudes, and convictions. This means that we must dialogue with ourselves, and hence we must do battle with ourselves. This is why, from this perspective, the methodology of the Platonic dialogue is of such crucial interest:
Despite what may have been said, Platonic thought bears no resemblance to a light-winged dove, who needs no effort to take off from earth to soar away into the pure spaces of utopia... at every moment, the dove has to fight against the soul of the interlocutor, which is filled with lead. Each degree of elevation must be fought for and won.  

To emerge victorious from this battle, it is not enough to disclose the truth. It is not even enough to demonstrate it. What is needed is persuasion, and for that one must use psychagogy, the art of seducing souls. Even at that, it is not enough to use only rhetoric, which, as it were, tries to persuade from a distance, by means of a continuous discourse. What is needed above all is dialectic, which demands the explicit consent of the interlocutor at every moment. Dialectic must skilfully choose a tortuous path — or rather, a series of apparently divergent, but nevertheless convergent, paths — in order to bring the interlocutor to discover the contradictions of his own position, or to admit an unforeseen conclusion. All the circles, detours, endless divisions, digressions, and subtleties which make the modern reader of Plato's Dialogues so uncomfortable are destined to make ancient readers and interlocutors travel a specific path. Thanks to these detours, "with a great deal of effort, one rubs names, definitions, visions and sensations against one another"; one "spends a long time in the company of these questions"; one "lives with them" until the light blazes forth. Yet one keeps on practicing, since "for reasonable people, the measure of listening to such discussions is the whole of life."  

What counts is not the solution of a particular problem, but the road travelled to reach it; a road along which the interlocutor, the disciple, and the reader form their thought, and make it more apt to discover the truth by itself:

Stranger: Suppose someone asked us this question about our class of elementary school-children learning to read. "When a child is asked what letters spell a word — it can be any word you please — are we to regard this exercise as undertaken to discover the correct spelling of the particular word the teacher assigned, or as designed rather to make the child better able to deal with all words he may be asked to spell?"
Young Socrates: Surely we reply that the purpose is to teach him to read them all.
Stranger: How does this principle apply to our present search for the statesman? Why did we set ourselves the problem? Is our chief purpose to find the statesman, or have we the larger aim of becoming better dialecticians, more able to tackle all questions?
Young Socrates: Here, too, the answer is clear; we aim to become better dialecticians with regard to all possible subjects.
As we see, the subject-matter of the dialogue counts less than the method applied in it, and the solution of a problem has less value than the road travelled in common in order to resolve it. The point is not to find the answer to a problem before anyone else, but to practice, as effectively as possible, the application of a method:

ease and speed in reaching the answer to the problem propounded are most commendable, but the *logos* requires that this be only a secondary, not a primary reason for commending an argument. What we must value first and foremost, above all else, is the philosophical method itself, and this consists in ability to divide according to forms. If, therefore, either a lengthy *logos* or an unusually brief one leaves the hearer more able to find the forms, it is this presentation of the *logos* which must be diligently carried through.  

As a dialectical exercise, the Platonic dialogue corresponds exactly to a spiritual exercise. There are two reasons for this. In the first place, discreetly but genuinely, the dialogue guides the interlocutor – and the reader – towards conversion. Dialogue is only possible if the interlocutor has a real *desire* to dialogue: that is, if he truly wants to discover the truth, desires the Good from the depths of his soul, and agrees to submit to the rational demands of the Logos. His act of faith must correspond to that of Socrates: “It is because I am convinced of its truth that I am ready, with your help, to inquire into the nature of virtue.”

In fact, the dialectical effort is an ascent in common towards the truth and towards the Good, “which every soul pursues.” Furthermore, in Plato’s view, every dialectical exercise, precisely because it is an exercise of pure thought, subject to the demands of the Logos, turns the soul away from the sensible world, and allows it to convert itself towards the Good. It is the spirit’s itinerary towards the divine.

3 Learning to Die

There is a mysterious connection between language and death. This was one of the favorite themes of the late Brice Parain, who wrote: “Language develops only upon the death of individuals.” For the Logos represents a demand for universal rationality, and presupposes a world of immutable norms, which are opposed to the perpetual state of becoming and changing appetites characteristic of individual, corporeal life. In this opposition, he who remains faithful to the Logos risks losing his life. This was the case with Socrates, who died for his faithfulness to the Logos.
Socrates’ death was the radical event which founded Platonism. After all, the essence of Platonism consists in the affirmation that the Good is the ultimate cause of all beings. In the words of a fourth-century Neoplatonist:

If all beings are beings only by virtue of goodness, and if they participate in the Good, then the first must necessarily be a good which transcends being. Here is an eminent proof of this: souls of value despise being for the sake of the Good, whenever they voluntarily place themselves in danger, for their country, their loved ones, or for virtue.  

Socrates exposed himself to death for the sake of virtue. He preferred to die rather than renounce the demands of his conscience, thus preferring the Good above being, and thought and conscience above the life of his body. This is nothing other than the fundamental philosophical choice. If it is true that philosophy subjugates the body’s will to live to the higher demands of thought, it can rightly be said that philosophy is the training and apprenticeship for death. As Socrates puts it in the Phaedo: “it is a fact, Simmias, that those who go about philosophizing correctly are in training for death, and that to them of all men death is least alarming.”

The death in question here is the spiritual separation of the soul and the body:

separating the soul as much as possible from the body, and accustoming it to gather itself together from every part of the body and concentrate itself until it is completely independent, and to have its dwelling, so far as it can, both now and in the future, alone and by itself, freed from the shackles of the body.

Such is the Platonic spiritual exercise. But we must be wary of misinterpreting it. In particular, we must not isolate it from the philosophical death of Socrates, whose presence dominates the whole of the Phaedo. The separation between soul and body under discussion here – whatever its prehistory – bears absolutely no resemblance to any state of trance or catalepsy. In the latter, the body loses consciousness, while the soul is in a supernatural visionary state. All the arguments in the Phaedo, both preceding and following the passage we have quoted above, show that the goal of this philosophical separation is for the soul to liberate itself, shedding the passions linked to the corporeal senses, so as to attain to the autonomy of thought.

We can perhaps get a better idea of this spiritual exercise if we understand it as an attempt to liberate ourselves from a partial, passionate point of view – linked to the senses and the body – so as to rise to the universal, normative viewpoint of thought, submitting ourselves to the demands of the Logos and
the norm of the Good. Training for death is training to die to one’s individuality and passions, in order to look at things from the perspective of universality and objectivity.

Such an exercise requires the concentration of thought upon itself, by means of meditation and an inner dialogue. Plato alludes to this process in the Republic, once again in the context of the tyranny of individual passions. The tyranny of desire, he tells us, shows itself particularly clearly in dreams:

The savage part of the soul . . . does not hesitate, in thought, to try to have sex with its mother, or with anyone else, man, god, or animal. It is ready to commit any bloody crime; there is no food it would not eat; and, in a word, it does not stop short of any madness or shamelessness.\textsuperscript{115}

To liberate ourselves from this tyranny, we are to have recourse to a spiritual exercise of the same type as that described in the Phaedo:

When, however, a man does not go to sleep before he has awakened his rational faculty, and regaled it with excellent discourses and investigations, concentrating himself on himself, having also appeased the appetitive part . . . and calmed the irascible part . . . once he has calmed these two parts of the soul, and stimulated the third, in which reason resides . . . it is then that the soul best attains to truth.\textsuperscript{116}

Here we shall ask the reader’s indulgence to embark on a brief digression. To present philosophy as “training for death” was a decision of paramount importance. As Socrates’ interlocutor in the Phaedo was quick to remark, such a characterization seems somewhat laughable, and the common man would be right in calling philosophers moribund mopers who, if they are put to death, will have earned their punishment well.\textsuperscript{117} For anyone who takes philosophy seriously, however, this Platonic dictum is profoundly true. It has had an enormous influence on Western philosophy, and has been taken up even by such adversaries of Platonism as Epicurus and Heidegger. Compared to this formulation, the philosophical verbiage both of the past and of the present seems empty indeed. In the words of La Rochefoucauld, “Neither the sun nor death can be looked at directly.”\textsuperscript{118}

Indeed, the only ones even to attempt to do so are philosophers. Beneath all their diverse conceptions of death, one common virtue recurs again and again: lucidity. For Plato, he who has already tasted of the immortality of thought cannot be frightened by the idea of being snatched away from sensible life. For the Epicurean, the thought of death is the same as the consciousness of the finite nature of existence, and it is this which gives an infinite value to each instant. Each of life’s moments surges forth laden with
incommensurable value: "Believe that each day that has dawned will be your last; then you will receive each unexpected hour with gratitude."¹¹⁹

In the apprenticeship of death, the Stoic discovers the apprenticeship of freedom. Montaigne, in one of his best-known essays, That Philosophy is Learning how to Die, plagiarizes Seneca: "He who has learned how to die, has un-learned how to serve."¹²⁰ The thought of death transforms the tone and level of inner life: "Keep death before your eyes every day... and then you will never have any abject thought nor any excessive desire."¹²¹ This philosophical theme, in turn, is connected with that of the infinite value of the present moment, which we must live as if it were, simultaneously, both the first moment and the last.¹²²

Philosophy is still "a training for death" for a modern thinker such as Heidegger. For him, the authenticity of existence consists in the lucid anticipation of death, and it is up to each of us to choose between lucidity and diversion.¹²³

For Plato, training for death is a spiritual exercise which consists in changing one's point of view. We are to change from a vision of things dominated by individual passions to a representation of the world governed by the universality and objectivity of thought. This constitutes a conversion (metastrophe) brought about with the totality of the soul.¹²⁴ From the perspective of pure thought, things which are "human, all too human" seem awfully puny. This is one of the fundamental themes of Platonic spiritual exercises, and it is this which will allow us to maintain serenity in misfortunes:

The rational law declares that it is best to keep quiet as far as possible in misfortune, and not to complain, because we cannot know what is really good and evil in such things, and it does us no good for the future to take them hard, and nothing in human life is worthy of great concern, and our grieving is an obstacle to the very thing we need to come to our aid as quickly as possible in such cases.

What do you mean?

To deliberate, I said, about what has happened to us, and, as in dice-games, to re-establish our position according to whatever numbers turn up, however reason indicates would be best, and... always accustom the soul to come as quickly as possible to cure the ailing part and raise up what has fallen, making lamentations disappear by means of its therapy.¹²⁵

One could say that this spiritual exercise is already Stoic,¹²⁶ since in it we can see the utilization of maxims and principles intended to "accustom the soul," and liberate it from the passions. Among these maxims, the one affirming the unimportance of human affairs plays an important role. Yet, in its turn, this maxim is only the consequence of the movement described in the Phaedo,
whereby the soul, moving from individuality to universality, rises to the level of pure thought.

The three key concepts of the insignificance of human affairs, contempt for death, and the universal vision characteristic of pure thought are quite plainly linked in the following passage:

there is this further point to be considered in distinguishing the philosophical from the unphilosophical nature... the soul must not contain any hint of servility. For nothing can be more contrary than such pettiness to the quality of a soul which must constantly strive to embrace the universal totality of things divine and human... But that soul to which pertain grandeur of thought and the contemplation of the totality of time and of being, do you think that it can consider human life to be a matter of great importance? Hence such a man will not suppose death to be terrible.127

Here, “training for death” is linked to the contemplation of the Whole and elevation of thought, which rises from individual, passionate subjectivity to the universal perspective. In other words, it attains to the exercise of pure thought. In this passage, for the first time, this characteristic of the philosopher receives the appellation it will maintain throughout ancient tradition: greatness of soul.128 Greatness of soul is the fruit of the universality of thought. Thus, the whole of the philosopher’s speculative and contemplative effort becomes a spiritual exercise, insofar as he raises his thought up to the perspective of the Whole, and liberates it from the illusions of individuality (in the words of Friedmann: “Step out of duration... become eternal by transcending yourself”).

From such a perspective, even physics becomes a spiritual exercise, which is situated on three levels. In the first place, physics can be a contemplative activity, which has its end in itself, providing joy and serenity to the soul, and liberating it from day-to-day worries. This is the spirit of Aristotelian physics: “nature, which fashioned creatures, gives amazing pleasure in their study to all who can trace links of causation, and are naturally philosophers.”129 As we have seen, it was in the contemplation of nature that the Epicurean Lucretius found “a divine delight.”130 For the Stoic Epictetus, the meaning of our existence resides in this contemplation: we have been placed on earth in order to contemplate divine creation, and we must not die before we have witnessed its marvels and lived in harmony with nature.131

Clearly, the precise meaning of the contemplation of nature varies widely from one philosophy to another. There is a great deal of difference between Aristotelian physics, for example, and the feeling for nature as we find it in Philo of Alexandria and Plutarch. It is nevertheless interesting to note with what enthusiasm these two authors speak about their imaginative physics:
Those who practice wisdom . . . are excellent contemplators of nature and everything she contains. They examine the earth, the sea, the sky, the heavens, and all their inhabitants; they are joined in thought to the sun, the moon, and all the other stars, both fixed and wandering, in their courses; and although they are attached to the earth by their bodies, they provide their souls with wings, so that they may walk on the ether and contemplate the powers that live there, as is fitting for true citizens of the world . . . and so, filled with excellence, accustomed to take no notice of ills of the body or of exterior things . . . it goes without saying that such men, rejoicing in their virtues, make of their whole lives a festival.\textsuperscript{132}

These last lines are an allusion to an aphorism of Diogenes the Cynic, which is also quoted by Plutarch: "Does not a good man consider every day a festival?" "And a very splendid one, to be sure," continues Plutarch,

if we are virtuous. For the world is the most sacred and divine of temples, and the one most fitting for the gods. Man is introduced into it by birth to be a spectator: not of artificial, immobile statues, but of the perceptible images of intelligible essences . . . such as the sun, the moon, the stars, the rivers whose water always flows afresh, and the earth, which sends forth food for plants and animals alike. A life which is a perfect revelation, and an initiation into these mysteries, should be filled with tranquillity and joy.\textsuperscript{133}

Physics as a spiritual exercise can also take on the form of an imaginative "overflight," which causes human affairs to be regarded as of little importance.\textsuperscript{134} We encounter this theme in Marcus Aurelius:

Suppose you found yourself all of a sudden raised up to the heavens, and that you were to look down upon human affairs in all their motley diversity. You would hold them in contempt if you were to see, in the same glance, how great is the number of beings of the ether and the air, living round about you.\textsuperscript{135}

The same theme occurs in Seneca:

The soul has attained the culmination of happiness when, having crushed underfoot all that is evil, it takes flight and penetrates the inner recesses of nature. It is then, while wandering amongst the very stars, that it likes to laugh at the costly pavements of the rich . . . But the soul cannot despise [all these riches] before it has been all around the world, and casting a contemptuous glance at the narrow globe of the earth from above, says to itself: "So this is the pin-point which so many nations
divide among themselves with fire and sword? How ridiculous are the boundaries of men!”

In this spiritual exercise of the vision of totality, and elevation of thought to the level of universal thought, we can distinguish a third degree, in which we come closer to the Platonic theme from which we started out. In the words of Marcus Aurelius:

Don’t limit yourself to breathing along with the air that surrounds you; from now on, think along with the Thought which embraces all things. For the intellective power is no less universally diffused, and does not penetrate any the less into each being capable of receiving it, than the air in the case of one capable of breathing it... you will make a large room at once for yourself by embracing in your thought the whole Universe, and grasping ever-continuing Time.

At this stage, it is as though we die to our individuality; in so doing, we accede, on the one hand, to the interiority of our consciousness, and on the other, to the universality of thought of the All.

You were already the All, but because something else besides the All came to be added on to you, you have become less than the All, by the very fact of this addition. For the addition did not come about from being – what could be added to the All? – but rather from not-being. When one becomes “someone” out of not-being, one is no longer the All, until one leaves the not-being behind. Moreover, you increase yourself when you reject everything other than the All, and when you have rejected it, the All will be present to you... The All had no need to come in order to be present. If it is not present, the reason is that it is you who have distanced yourself from it. “Distancing yourself” does not mean leaving it to go someplace else – for it would be there, too. Rather, it means turning away from the All, despite the fact that it is there.

With Plotinus, we now return to Platonism. The Platonic tradition remained faithful to Plato’s spiritual exercises. We need only add that, in Neoplatonism, the idea of spiritual progress plays a much more explicit role than in Plato’s writings. In Neoplatonism, the stages of spiritual progress corresponded to different degrees of virtue. The hierarchy of these stages is described in many Neoplatonic texts, serving in particular as the framework for Marinus’ Life of Proclus. Porphyry, editor of Plotinus’ Enneads, systematically arranged his master’s work according to the stages of this spiritual progress. First, the soul was purified by its gradual detachment from the body; then came the
knowledge of, and subsequent passing beyond, the sensible world; finally, the soul achieved conversion toward the Intellect and the One.\textsuperscript{141}

Spiritual exercises are a prerequisite for spiritual progress. In his treatise \textit{On Abstinence fromAnimate Beings}, Porphyry sums up the Platonic tradition quite well. We must, he tells us, undertake two exercises (\textit{meletai}): in the first place, we must turn our thought away from all that is mortal and material. Secondly, we must return toward the activity of the Intellect.\textsuperscript{142} The first stage of these Neoplatonic exercises includes aspects which are highly ascetic, in the modern sense of the word: a vegetarian diet, among other things. In the same context, Porphyry insists strongly on the importance of spiritual exercises. The contemplation (\textit{theoria}) which brings happiness, he tells us, does not consist in the accumulation of discourse and abstract teachings, even if their subject is true Being. Rather, we must make sure our studies are accompanied by an effort to make these teachings become "nature and life" within us.\textsuperscript{143}

In the philosophy of Plotinus, spiritual exercises are of fundamental importance. Perhaps the best example can be found in the way Plotinus defines the essence of the soul and its immateriality. If we have doubts about the immortality and immateriality of the soul, says Plotinus, this is because we are accustomed to see it filled with irrational desires and violent sentiments and passions.

If one wants to know the nature of a thing, one must examine it in its pure state, since every addition to a thing is an obstacle to the knowledge of that thing. When you examine it, then, remove from it everything that is not itself; better still remove all your stains from yourself and examine yourself, and you will have faith in your immortality.\textsuperscript{144}

If you do not yet see your own beauty, do as the sculptor does with a statue which must become beautiful: he removes one part, scrapes another, makes one area smooth, and cleans the other, until he causes the beautiful face in the statue to appear. In the same way, you too must remove everything that is superfluous, straighten that which is crooked, and purify all that is dark until you make it brilliant. Never stop sculpting your own statue, until the divine splendor of virtue shines in you... If you have become this... and have nothing alien inside you mixed with yourself... when you see that you have become this... concentrate your gaze and see. For it is only an eye such as this that can look on the great Beauty.\textsuperscript{145}

Here we can see how the the demonstration of the soul's immateriality has been transformed into experience. Only he who liberates himself and purifies himself from the passions, which conceal the true reality of the soul, can understand that the soul is immaterial and immortal. Here, knowledge is a
spiritual exercise.\textsuperscript{146} We must first undergo moral purification, in order to become capable of understanding.

When the object of our knowledge is no longer the soul, but the Intellect\textsuperscript{147} and above all the One, principle of all things, we must once again have recourse to spiritual exercises. In the case of the One, Plotinus makes a clear distinction between, on the one hand, “instruction,” which speaks about its object in an exterior way, and, on the other, the “path,” which truly leads to concrete knowledge of the Good: “We are \textit{instructed about it} by analogies, negations, and the knowledge of things which come from it . . . we are \textit{led towards it} by purifications, virtues, inner settings in order, and ascents into the intelligible world.”\textsuperscript{148} Plotinus’ writings are full of passages describing such spiritual exercises, the goal of which was not merely to \textit{know} the Good, but to \textit{become identical with it}, in a complete annihilation of individuality. To achieve this goal, he tells us, we must avoid thinking of any determinate form,\textsuperscript{149} strip the soul of all particular shape,\textsuperscript{150} and set aside all things other than the One.\textsuperscript{151} It is then that, in a fleeting blaze of light, there takes place the metamorphosis of the self:

Then the seer no longer sees his object, for in that instant he no longer distinguishes himself from it; he no longer has the impression of two separate things, but \textit{he has, in a sense, become another}. He is no longer himself, nor does he belong to himself, but he is one with the One, as the centre of one circle coincides with the centre of another.\textsuperscript{152}

4 Learning How to Read

In the preceding pages, we have tried to describe – albeit too briefly – the richness and variety of the practice of spiritual exercises in antiquity. We have seen that, at first glance, they appear to vary widely. Some, like Plutarch’s \textit{ethismoi}, designed to curb curiosity, anger or gossip, were only practices intended to ensure good moral habits. Others, particularly the meditations of the Platonic tradition, demanded a high degree of mental concentration. Some, like the contemplation of nature as practiced in all philosophical schools, turned the soul toward the cosmos, while still others – rare and exceptional – led to a transfiguration of the personality, as in the experiences of Plotinus. We also saw that the emotional tone and notional content of these exercises varied widely from one philosophical school to another: from the mobilization of energy and consent to destiny of the Stoics, to the relaxation and detachment of the Epicureans, to mental concentration and renunciation of the sensible world among the Platonists.

Beneath this apparent diversity, however, there is a profound unity, both in the means employed and in the ends pursued. The means employed are
the rhetorical and dialectical techniques of persuasion, the attempts at mastering one's inner dialogue, and mental concentration. In all philosophical schools, the goal pursued in these exercises is self-realization and improvement. All schools agree that man, before his philosophical conversion, is in a state of unhappy disquiet. Consumed by worries, torn by passions, he does not live a genuine life, nor is he truly himself. All schools also agree that man can be delivered from this state. He can accede to genuine life, improve himself, transform himself, and attain a state of perfection. It is precisely for this that spiritual exercises are intended. Their goal is a kind of self-formation, or paideia, which is to teach us to live, not in conformity with human prejudices and social conventions — for social life is itself a product of the passions — but in conformity with the nature of man, which is none other than reason. Each in its own way, all schools believed in the freedom of the will, thanks to which man has the possibility to modify, improve, and realize himself. Underlying this conviction is the parallelism between physical and spiritual exercises: just as, by dint of repeated physical exercises, athletes give new form and strength to their bodies, so the philosopher develops his strength of soul, modifies his inner climate, transforms his vision of the world, and, finally, his entire being. The analogy seems all the more self-evident in that the gymnasion, the place where physical exercises were practiced, was the same place where philosophy lessons were given; in other words, it was also the place for training in spiritual gymnastics.

The quest for self-realization, final goal of spiritual exercises, is well symbolized by the Plotinian image of sculpting one's own statue. It is often misunderstood, since people imagine that this expression corresponds to a kind of moral aestheticism. On this interpretation, its meaning would be to adopt a pose, to select an attitude, or to fabricate a personality for oneself. In fact, it is nothing of the sort. For the ancients, sculpture was an art which "took away," as opposed to painting, an art which "added on." The statue pre-existed in the marble block, and it was enough to take away what was superfluous in order to cause it to appear.

One conception was common to all the philosophical schools: people are unhappy because they are the slave of their passions. In other words, they are unhappy because they desire things they may not be able to obtain, since they are exterior, alien, and superfluous to them. It follows that happiness consists in independence, freedom, and autonomy. In other words, happiness is the return to the essential: that which is truly "ourselves," and which depends on us.

This is obviously true in Platonism, where we find the famous image of Glaukos, the god who lives in the depths of the sea. Covered as he is with mud, seaweed, seashells, and pebbles, Glaukos is unrecognizable, and the same holds true for the soul: the body is a kind of thick, coarse crust, covering and completely disfiguring it, and the soul's true nature would appear only if
it rose up out of the sea, throwing off everything alien to it.\textsuperscript{157} The spiritual exercise of apprenticeship for death, which consists in separating oneself from the body, its passions, and its desires, purifies the soul from all these superfluous additions. It is enough to practice this exercise in order for the soul to return to its true nature, and devote itself exclusively to the exercise of pure thought.

Much the same thing can be said for Stoicism. With the help of the distinction between what does and does not depend on us; we can reject all that is alien to us, and return to our true selves. In other words, we can achieve moral freedom.

Finally, the same also holds true for Epicureanism. By ignoring unnatural and unnecessary desires, we can return to our original nucleus of freedom and independence, which may be defined by the satisfaction of natural and necessary desires.

Thus, all spiritual exercises are, fundamentally, a return to the self, in which the self is liberated from the state of alienation into which it has been plunged by worries, passions, and desires. The "self" liberated in this way is no longer merely our egoistic, passionate individuality: it is our moral person, open to universality and objectivity, and participating in universal nature or thought.

With the help of these exercises, we should be able to attain to wisdom; that is, to a state of complete liberation from the passions, utter lucidity, knowledge of ourselves and of the world. In fact, for Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans, and the Stoics, such an ideal of human perfection serves to define divine perfection, a state by definition inaccessible to man.\textsuperscript{158} With the possible exception of the Epicurean school,\textsuperscript{159} wisdom was conceived as an ideal after which one strives without the hope of ever attaining it. Under normal circumstances, the only state accessible to man is philo-sophia: the love of, or progress toward, wisdom. For this reason, spiritual exercises must be taken up again and again, in an ever-renewed effort.

The philosopher lives in an intermediate state. He is not a sage, but he is not a non-sage, either.\textsuperscript{160} He is therefore constantly torn between the non-philosophical and the philosophical life, between the domain of the habitual and the everyday, on the one hand, and, on the other, the domain of consciousness and lucidity.\textsuperscript{161} To the same extent that the philosophical life is equivalent to the practice of spiritual exercises, it is also a tearing away from everyday life. It is a conversion,\textsuperscript{162} a total transformation of one's vision, life-style, and behavior.

Among the Cynics, champions of askesis, this engagement amounted to a total break with the profane world, analogous to the monastic calling in Christianity. The rupture took the form of a way of living, and even of dress, completely foreign to that of the rest of mankind. This is why it was sometimes said that Cynicism was not a philosophy in the proper sense of the
term, but a state of life (enstasis). In fact, however, all philosophical schools engaged their disciples upon a new way of life, albeit in a more moderate way. The practice of spiritual exercises implied a complete reversal of received ideas: one was to renounce the false values of wealth, honors, and pleasures, and turn towards the true values of virtue, contemplation, a simple life-style, and the simple happiness of existing. This radical opposition explains the reaction of non-philosophers, which ranged from the mockery we find expressed in the comic poets, to the outright hostility which went so far as to cause the death of Socrates.

The individual was to be torn away from his habits and social prejudices, his way of life totally changed, and his way of looking at the world radically metamorphosed into a cosmic—"physical" perspective. We ought not to underestimate the depth and amplitude of the shock that these changes could cause, changes which might seem fantastic and senseless to healthy, everyday common sense. It was impossible to maintain oneself at such heights continuously; this was a conversion that needed always to be reconquered. It was probably because of such difficulties that, as we learn in Damascius' Life of Isidorus, the philosopher Sallustius used to declare that philosophy was impossible for man. He probably meant by this that philosophers were not capable of remaining philosophers at every instant of their lives. Rather, even though they kept the title of "philosophers," they would be sure to fall back into the habits of everyday life. The Skeptics, for instance, refused outright to live philosophically, deliberately choosing to "live like everybody else," although not until after having made a philosophical detour so intense that it is hard to believe that their "everyday life" was quite so "everyday" as they seem to have pretended.

Our claim has been, then, that philosophy in antiquity was a spiritual exercise. As for philosophical theories: they were either placed explicitly in the service of spiritual practice, as was the case in Stoicism and Epicureanism, or else they were taken as the objects of intellectual exercises, that is, of a practice of the contemplative life which, in the last analysis, was itself nothing other than a spiritual exercise. It is impossible to understand the philosophical theories of antiquity without taking into account this concrete perspective, since this is what gives them their true meaning.

When we read the works of ancient philosophers, the perspective we have described should cause us to give increased attention to the existential attitudes underlying the dogmatic edifices we encounter. Whether we have to do with dialogues as in the case of Plato, class notes as in the case of Aristotle, treatises like those of Plotinus, or commentaries like those of Proclus, a philosopher's works cannot be interpreted without taking into consideration the concrete situation which gave birth to them. They are the products of a philosophical school, in the most concrete sense of the term, in which a master forms his disciples, trying to guide them to self-transformation and
-realization. Thus, the written work is a reflection of pedagogical, psychagogic, and methodological preoccupations.

Although every written work is a monologue, the philosophical work is always implicitly a dialogue. The dimension of the possible interlocutor is always present within it. This explains the incoherencies and contradictions which modern historians discover with astonishment in the works of ancient philosophers.\textsuperscript{166} In philosophical works such as these, thought cannot be expressed according to the pure, absolute necessity of a systematic order. Rather, it must take into account the level of the interlocutor, and the concrete tempo of the logos in which it is expressed. It is the economy proper to a given written logos which conditions its thought content, and it is the logos that constitutes a living system which, in the words of Plato, "ought to have its own body . . . it must not lack either head or feet: it must have a middle and extremities so composed as to suit each other and the whole work."\textsuperscript{167}

Each logos is a "system," but the totality of logoi written by an author does not constitute a system. This is obviously true in the case of Plato's dialogues, but it is equally true in the case of the lectures of Aristotle. For Aristotle's writings are indeed neither more nor less than lecture-notes; and the error of many Aristotelian scholars has been that they have forgotten this fact, and imagined instead that they were manuals or systematic treatises, intended to propose a complete exposition of a systematic doctrine. Consequently, they have been astonished at the inconsistencies, and even contradictions, they discovered between one writing and another. As Düring\textsuperscript{168} has convincingly shown, Aristotle's various logoi correspond to the concrete situations created by specific academic debates. Each lesson corresponds to different conditions and a specific problematic. It has inner unity, but its notional content does not overlap precisely with that of any other lesson. Moreover, Aristotle had no intention of setting forth a complete system of reality.\textsuperscript{169} Rather, he wished to train his students in the technique of using correct methods in logic, the natural sciences, and ethics. Düring gives an excellent description of the Aristotelian method:

the most characteristic feature in Aristotle is his incessant discussion of problems. Almost every important assertion is an answer to a question put in a certain way, and is valid only as an answer to this particular question. That which is really interesting in Aristotle is his framing of the problems, not his answers. It is part of his method of inquiry to approach a problem or a group of problems again and again from different angles. His own words are ἄλλη ἐγκαταλείπεται ποιήσας ὅμοιον ["now, taking a different starting-point . . ."] . . . From different starting-points, ἄρχει he strikes off into different lines of thought and ultimately reaches inconsistent answers. Take as example his discussion
of the soul... in each case the answer is the consequence of the manner in which he posits the problem. In short, it is possible to explain this type of inconsistencies as natural results of the method he applies. 170

In the Aristotelian method of "different starting-points," we can recognize the method Aristophanes attributed to Socrates, and we have seen to what extent all antiquity remained faithful to this method. 171 For this reason, Düring's description can in fact apply, mutatis mutandis, to almost all the philosophers of antiquity. Such a method, consisting not in setting forth a system, but in giving precise responses to precisely limited questions, is the heritage – lasting throughout antiquity – of the dialectical method; that is to say, of the dialectical exercise.

To return to Aristotle: there is a profound truth in the fact that he himself used to call his courses methodoi. 172 On this point, moreover, the Aristotelian spirit corresponds to the spirit of the Platonic Academy, which was, above all, a school which formed its pupils for an eventual political role, and a research institute where investigations were carried out in a spirit of free discussion. 173

It may be of interest to compare Aristotle's methodology with that of Plotinus. We learn from Porphyry that Plotinus took the themes from the problems which came up in the course of his teaching. 174 Plotinus' various logos, situated as they are within a highly specific problematique, are responses to precise questions. They are adapted to the needs of his disciples, and are an attempt to bring about in them a specific psychagogic effect. We must not make the mistake of imagining that they are the successive chapters of a vast, systematic exposition of Plotinus' thought. In each of these logos, we encounter the spiritual method particular to Plotinus, but there is no lack of incoherence and contradictions on points of detail when we compare the doctrinal content of the respective treatises. 175

When we first approach the Neoplatonic commentaries on Plato and Aristotle, we have the impression that their form and content are dictated exclusively by doctrinal and exegetical considerations. Upon closer examination, however, we realize that, in each commentary, the exegetical method and doctrinal content are functions of the spiritual level of the audience to which the commentary is addressed. The reason for this is that there existed a cursus of philosophical instruction, based on spiritual progress. One did not read the same texts to beginners, to those in progress, and to those already having achieved perfection, and the concepts appearing in the commentaries are also functions of the spiritual capacities of their addressees. Consequently, doctrinal content can vary considerably from one commentary to another, even when written by the same author. This does not mean that the commentator changed his doctrines, but that the needs of his disciples were different. 176 In the literary genre of parenesis, used for exhorting beginners, one could, in order to bring about a specific effect in the interlocutor's soul, utilize
the arguments of a rival school. For example, a Stoic might say, “even if pleasure is the good of the soul (as the Epicureans would have it), nevertheless we must purify ourselves of passion.” Marcus Aurelius exhorted himself in the same manner. If, he writes, the world is a mere aggregate of atoms, as the Epicureans would have it, then death is not to be feared.

Moreover, we ought not to forget that many a philosophical demonstration derives its evidential force not so much from abstract reasoning as from an experience which is at the same time a spiritual exercise. We have seen that this was the case for the Plotinian demonstration of the immortality of the soul. Let the soul practice virtue, he said, and it will understand that it is immortal. We find an analogous example in the Christian writer Augustine. In his On the Trinity, Augustine presents a series of psychological images of the Trinity which do not form a coherent system, and which have consequently been the source of a great deal of trouble for his commentators. In fact, however, Augustine is not trying to present a systematic theory of trinitarian analogies. Rather, by making the soul turn inward upon itself, he wants to make it experience the fact that it is an image of the Trinity. In his words: “These trinities occur within us and are within us, when we recall, look at, and wish for such things.” Ultimately, it is in the triple act of remembering God, knowing God, and loving God that the soul discovers itself to be the image of the Trinity.

From the preceding examples, we may get some idea of the change in perspective that may occur in our reading and interpretation of the philosophical works of antiquity when we consider them from the point of view of the practice of spiritual exercises. Philosophy then appears in its original aspect: not as a theoretical construct, but as a method for training people to live and to look at the world in a new way. It is an attempt to transform mankind. Contemporary historians of philosophy are today scarcely inclined to pay attention to this aspect, although it is an essential one. The reason for this is that, in conformity with a tradition inherited from the Middle Ages and from the modern era, they consider philosophy to be a purely abstract-theoretical activity. Let us briefly recall how this conception came into existence.

It seems to be the result of the absorption of philosophia by Christianity. Since its inception, Christianity has presented itself as a philosophia, insofar as it assimilated into itself the traditional practices of spiritual exercises. We see this occurring in Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Augustine, and monasticism. With the advent of medieval Scholasticism, however, we find a clear distinction being drawn between theologia and philosophia. Theology became conscious of its autonomy qua supreme science, while philosophy was emptied of its spiritual exercises which, from now on, were relegated to Christian mysticism and ethics. Reduced to the rank of a “handmaid of theology,” philosophy’s role was henceforth to furnish theology with conceptual – and hence purely theoretical – material. When, in the modern age, philosophy
regained its autonomy, it still retained many features inherited from this medieval conception. In particular, it maintained its purely theoretical character, which even evolved in the direction of a more and more thorough systematization. Not until Nietzsche, Bergson, and existentialism does philosophy consciously return to being a concrete attitude, a way of life and of seeing the world. For their part, however, contemporary historians of ancient thought have, as a general rule, remained prisoners of the old, purely theoretical conception of philosophy. Contemporary structuralist tendencies do not, moreover, incline them to correct this misconception, since spiritual exercises introduce into consideration a subjective, mutable, and dynamic component, which does not fit comfortably into the structuralists' models of explanation.

We have now returned to the contemporary period and our initial point of departure, the lines by G. Friedmann we quoted at the beginning of this study. We have tried to reply to those who, like Friedmann, ask themselves the question: how is it possible to practice spiritual exercises in the twentieth century? We have tried to do so by recalling the existence of a highly rich and varied Western tradition. There can be no question, of course, of mechanically imitating stereotyped schemas. After all, did not Socrates and Plato urge their disciples to find the solutions they needed by themselves? And yet, we cannot afford to ignore such a valuable quantity of experience, accumulated over millennia. To mention but one example, Stoicism and Epicureanism do seem to correspond to two opposite but inseparable poles of our inner life: tension and relaxation, duty and serenity, moral conscience and the joy of existence.

Vauvenargues said, "A truly new and truly original book would be one which made people love old truths." It is my hope that I have been "truly new and truly original" in this sense, since my goal has indeed been to make people love a few old truths. Old truths: . . . there are some truths whose meaning will never be exhausted by the generations of man. It is not that they are difficult; on the contrary, they are often extremely simple. Often, they even appear to be banal. Yet for their meaning to be understood, these truths must be lived, and constantly re-experienced. Each generation must take up, from scratch, the task of learning to read and to re-read these "old truths."

We spend our lives "reading," that is, carrying out exegeses, and sometimes even exegeses of exegeses. Epictetus tells us what he thinks of such activities:

"Come and listen to me read my commentaries . . . I will explain Chrysippus to you like no one else can, and I'll provide a complete analysis of his entire text . . . If necessary, I can even add the views of Antipater and Archedemos" . . . So it's for this, is it, that young men are to leave their fatherlands and their own parents: to come and listen to you explain words? Trifling little words?"
And yet we have forgotten *how* to read: how to pause, liberate ourselves from our worries, return into ourselves, and leave aside our search for subtlety and originality, in order to meditate calmly, ruminate, and let the texts speak to us. This, too, is a spiritual exercise, and one of the most difficult. As Goethe said: “Ordinary people don’t know how much time and effort it takes to learn how to read. I’ve spent eighty years at it, and I still can’t say that I’ve reached my goal.”

NOTES


3 Epictetus, *Discourses*, 3, 22, 20: “From now on my mind [dianoia] is the material with which I have to work, as the carpenter has his timbers, the shoemaker his hides.”

4 Ignatius of Loyola (ca. 1491–1556), founder of the Jesuit Order, wrote his handbook entitled *Spiritual Exercises* beginning in 1522. The goal of the work was to purify its reader from sin and lead him to God, via a four-stage meditation: beginning with meditation on sin, the reader progresses to considering the kingdom of Christ, the passion, and finally the risen and glorified Lord. – Trans.

5 In Latin literature, cf., for example, Rufinus, *History of the Monks* [written ca. AD 403], ch. 29, PL 21, 410D: “Cum quadraginta annis fuisset in exercitii spiritualibus conversatus” [“After he had become conversant with spiritual exercises for forty years” – Trans.], and ch. 29 (ibid., col. 453D): “Ad acerias semetipsum spiritualis vitae extendit exercitia” [“He exerted himself to the more zealous exercises of the spiritual life.” – Trans.].


6 In his very important work *Seelenführung*, Methodik der Exerzitien in der Antike, Munich 1954, Paul Rabbow situated Ignatius of Loyola’s *Exercitia spiritualia* back within the ancient tradition.

7 There have been relatively few studies devoted to this subject. The fundamental work is that of Rabbow, *Seelenführung*; cf. also the review of Rabbow’s work by G. Luck, *Gnomon* 28 (1956), pp. 268–71; B.-L. Hĳmans Jr. *ἌΞΕΚΕΣΙῊ*, *Notes on Epictetus’ Educational System*, Assen 1959; A.C. Van Geytenbeek, *Musonius Rufus*

8 Pseudo-Galen, Philosophical History, 5, in H. Diels, ed., Doxographi Graeci, p. 602, 18; Pseudo-Plutarch, Placita, I, 2, ibid, p. 273, 14. The idea originates with the Cynics; cf. Diogenes Laertius, 6, 70–1, and now the important work of M.-O. Goulet-Cazé, L’Ascèse cynique. Un commentaire de Diogène Laërce, VI, 70, 71, Paris 1986. Lucian (Toxaris, 27; Vitarum auctio, 7) uses the word askesis to designate philosophical sects themselves. On the need for philosophical exercises, cf. Epictetus, Discourses, 2, 9, 13; 2, 18, 26; 3, 8, 1; 3, 12, 1–7; 4, 6, 16; 4, 12, 13; Musonius Rufus, p. 22, 9ff Hense; Seneca, Letter, 90, 46.

9 Seneca, Letter, 20, 2: “Philosophy teaches us how to act, not how to talk.”

10 Epictetus, Discourses, I, 4, 14ff: spiritual progress does not consist in learning how to explain Chrysippus better, but in transforming one’s own freedom; cf. 2, 16, 34.

11 Epictetus, Discourses, I, 15, 2: “The subject-matter of the art of living (i.e. philosophy) is the life of every individual;” cf. I, 26, 7. Plutarch, Table-talk, I, 2, 623B: “Since philosophy is the art of living, it should not be kept apart from any pastime.”

12 Galen, Galen On the Passions and Errors of the Soul, I, 4, p. 11, 4 Marquardt: “make yourself better.”


14 Seneca, Letter, 6, 1: “I feel, my dear Lucilius, that I am being not only reformed, but transformed . . . I therefore wish to impart to you this sudden change in myself.”


16 The Epicurean method must be distinguished from that of the Stoics. According to Olympiodorus, Commentary on the First Alcibiades of Plato, pp. 6, 6ff; 54, 15ff; 145, 12ff Westerink, the Stoics cure contrariety by contrariety; the Pythagoreans let the patient taste the passions with his fingertips; and Socrates treats his patients by homeopathy, leading them, for example, from the love of terrestrial

17 Cf. below. We find the distinction between what depends on us and what does not depend on us in Epictetus, Discourses, I, 1, 7; I, 4, 27; I, 22, 9; 2, 5, 4; and Epictetus, Manual, ch. 4.

18 Many Stoic treatises entitled On Exercises have been lost; cf. the list of titles in Diogenes Laertius, 7, 166–7. A short treatise entitled On Exercise, by Musonius Rufus, has been preserved (pp. 22–7 Hense). After a general introduction concerning the need for exercises in philosophy, Rufus recommends physical exercises: becoming used to foul weather, hunger, and thirst. These exercises benefit the soul, giving it strength and temperance. He then recommends exercises designed particularly for the soul, which, says Rufus, consist in steeping oneself in the demonstrations and principles bearing on the distinction between real and apparent goods and evils. With the help of these exercises, we will get into the habit of not fearing what most people consider as evils: poverty, suffering, and death. One chapter of Epictetus’ Discourses is dedicated to ἀσκησις (3, 12, 1–7). Cf. below. The treatise On Exercise by the PseudoPlutarch, preserved in Arabic (cf. J. Gildemeister and F. Bücheler, “PseudoPlutarchos Peri askēseis,” Rheinisches Museum NF 27 (1872), pp. 520–38), is of no particular interest in this context.


20 Philo Judaeus, Allegorical Interpretations, 3, 18.

21 The word therapeiai can also mean acts of worship, and this meaning would be entirely possible in Philo’s mind. Nevertheless, in the present context it seems to me that it designates the therapeutics of the passions. Cf. Philo Judaeus, On the Special Laws, I, 191; 197; 230; 2, 17.


24 The idea of tension (tonos) is particularly in evidence in Epictetus, Discourses, 4, 12, 15 and 19. The concept of tonos is central to Stoicism, as is that of relaxation (anesis) in Epicureanism. Cf. F. Ravaission, Essai sur la Metaphysique d’Aristote, Paris, 1846, repr. Hildesheim 1963, p. 117.

25 Epictetus, Discourses, 4, 12, 7; cf. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 3, 13; Galen, Galen On the Passions and Errors of the Soul, 1, 9, 51, p. 40, 10 Marquardt.

26 Epictetus, Discourses, 4, 12, 15–18.

27 Cf. below.

28 Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 7, 54; cf. 3, 12; 8, 36; 9, 6.

29 Only the present depends on us, since our free action cannot be extended either to the past or to the future. Free action is that which either brings about something in the present, or else accepts the present event, which has been willed by fate; cf. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 2, 14; 4, 26, 5; 12, 26; Seneca, On Benefits, 7, 2, 4: “Rejoicing in these present events.”
30 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 3, 10; 2, 14; 8, 36.
31 Cf., for instance, Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 4, 23. Marcus also stresses the cosmic value of the instant in 5, 8, 3: "This event occurred for you, was prescribed for you, and had some kind of relationship to you, having been woven since the beginning, from the most ancient causes."
34 *Seneca, On Benefits*, 7, 2, 1–2; Epictetus, *Discourses*, 3, 3, 14–16.
36 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 7, 58: "In every contingency, keep before your eyes those who, when the same thing befell them, were saddened, astonished, resentful. Where are they now? Nowhere." Epictetus, *Manual*, ch. 21: "Keep before your eyes every day death and exile, and everything that seems terrible, but most of all death; and then you will never have any abject thought, nor excessive desire." On this exercise, see Rabbow, *Seelenführung*, p. 330.
37 Cf. the passage from Philo cited above. Hijmans, *ΔΕΚΕΣΙΣ*, p. 69, calls attention to the frequency of the expression "Remember!" in Epictetus. It recurs quite often in Marcus Aurelius, for instance, *Meditations*, 2, 4; 8, 15; 29. Cf. Galen, *Galen On the Passions and Errors of the Soul*, 1, 5, 25, p. 19, 8–10 Marquardt: "With the help of memory, keep 'at hand' the ugliness of those who succumb to anger, and the beauty of those who master it."
38 It is only after much hesitation that I have translated *melete* by "meditation." In fact, *melete* and its Latin equivalent *meditatio* designate "preparatory exercises," in particular those of rhetoricians. If I have finally resigned myself to adopting the translation "meditation," it is because the exercise designated by *melete* corresponds, in the last analysis, rather well to what we nowadays term *meditation*: an effort to assimilate an idea, notion, or principle, and make them come alive in the soul. We must not, however, lose sight of the term's ambiguity: meditation is exercise, and exercise is meditation. For instance, the "pre-meditation" of death is a "pre-exercise" of death; the *cottidiana meditatio* cited in the following note could just as well be translated as "daily exercises."
39 See Rabbow, *Seelenführung*, pp. 23–150, 325–8; and Seneca, *On Benefits*, 7, 2, 1: "These are the things that my friend Demetrius says the beginner in philosophy must grasp with both hands, these are the precepts that he must never let go. Rather, he must cling fast to them and make them a part of himself, and by daily meditation reach the point where these salutary maxims occur to him of their own accord." Cf. also Galen, *Galen On the Passions and Errors of the Soul*, 1, 5, 25, p. 19, 13 Marquardt.
41 See above.
42 See above.
44 Cf. Galen, Galen On the Passions and Errors of the Soul, I, 5, 24, p. 18, 12
Marquardt: “As soon as we get up in the morning, we must consider in advance, with regard to the various acts we will perform throughout the day, whether it is better to live as a slave of our passions, or to utilize reason against all of them.” Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 2, 1, 1: “At the break of dawn, say to yourself: ‘I'm going to come across a nosy person, an ingrate, a thug, a cheat, a jealous man, and an anti-social man. All these defects have afflicted them because of their ignorance of what is truly good and evil.’” Cf ibid, 5, 1, 1: “In the morning, when you have trouble getting up, have this thought at hand [procheiron]: ‘I’m getting up to do a man’s work.’”
45 On the examination of the conscience, see Rabbow, Seelenführung, pp. 180–8, 344–7; I. Hadot, Seneca, pp. 68–70; Hijnmans, ἈΣΚΗΣΗ, p. 88.
46 Cf. Plutarch, How One may Know One is Making Progress in Virtue, §12, 82F: “It was Zeno's belief that everyone could, thanks to his dreams, have knowledge of what progress he was making. One has made real progress if he no longer dreams that he is giving in to some shameful passion, or giving his consent to something evil or unjust – or even committing it – and if, instead, the soul's faculties of representation and aﬀectivity, relaxed by reason, shine as if in an ocean of diaphanous serenity, untroubled by waves.”
47 See below.
48 This is the domain of spiritual guidance; see I. Hadot, Seneca, pp. 5–97. Note especially Galen, Galen On the Passions and Errors of the Soul, 1, 7, 36, p. 27, 22 Marquardt: we are to ask an older man to tell us frankly about our defects.
49 Cf. Rabbow, Seelenführung, p. 311, n. 64; I. Hadot, Seneca, p. 59. Marcus Aurelius' Meditations are, of course, the example par excellence of this. Note also Horace, Satires, I, 4, 138: “When I have some spare time, I amuse myself by writing these thoughts down on paper.”
50 The phrase is Descartes', but it gives good expression to the Stoic ideal of inner coherence. [This is the third of René Descartes' well-known “four laws” which he exposes in Part 2 of his Discourse on the Method. – Trans.]

53 The term akroasis as used by Philo could designate, among other things, attending a course in philosophy; cf. Epictetus, Discourses, 3, 23, 27; 38. Normally, the course included the reading, with commentary, of a philosophical text (anagnosis), often done by the disciple and criticized by the master (cf. Epictetus, Discourses, I, 26, 1; Porphyry, Life of Plotinus, ch. 14). See also I. Bruns, De schola Epicetae, Kiel 1897. This does not, of course, exclude the individual reading of philosophical texts; cf. Epictetus, Discourses, 4, 4, 14–18 (where Epictetus reproaches his disciples for reading texts without putting them into practice). After the reading with commentary, a philosophy class would normally include a discussion (diatribe) with the audience, as well as individual discussions (cf. I. Hadot, Socrates, p. 65). For the listener, this entire ensemble could be a spiritual exercise. With regard to reading, we should add that exegesis, whether literal or allegorical, was one of the most important spiritual exercises at the end of antiquity, among both pagans and Christians.

54 On the educational program in Hellenistic schools, with its transition from apotomai (summaries of basic principles), and finally to full-scale treatises, see I. Hadot 1969a, pp. 53–6; 1969b.

55 On the exercise of definition, see below.

56 On this exercise, see Rabbow, Seelenführung, pp. 42–9.

57 Philo’s expression “indifference to indifferent things” corresponds exactly to the spiritual exercises mentioned by Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 11, 16: "Our soul finds within itself the power to live a perfectly happy life, if we can remain indifferent towards indifferent things." This formula seems to be a reminiscence of the definition of the goal of human life according to Aristo of Chios (SVF, I, §360, = Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, 2, 21, 129, 6, p. 183, 14–16 Stählin): "And why should I mention Aristo? He said the goal was indifference, but he leaves ‘the indifferent’ as simply ‘the indifferent.'" On this theme, see below. We must bear in mind that here “indifference” does not mean a lack of interest, but rather equal love for each of life’s instants; that is, we are not to make any "difference" between them.

58 See Rabbow, Seelenführung, pp. 223–49; Ingenkamp, Plutarchs Schülfen, pp. 105–18. The technical term for this process is ethismos.

59 Epicurus, Gnomologium Vaticanum, §64. Cf. also Letter to Menoeceus, §122: "No one can come too early or too late to secure the health of his soul."

60 Epicurus, Ratae Sententiae, §11: "If we were not troubled by our suspicions of the phenomena of the sky and about death, fearing that it concerns us, and also by our failure to grasp the limits of pains and desires, we should have no need of natural science [physiologai]." On Epicurean theology, see Schmid, "Epikur", D. Lemke, Die Theologie Epikurs, Munich 1973.

61 Epicurus, Ratae Sententiae, §29; Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus, §127.

Epicurus Fr. 469, p. 300, 26ff Usener.

On these Epicurean exercises of meditation, see Schmid, "Epikur," p. 744; Rabbow, Seelenführung, pp. 129, 336–8; I. Hadot, Seneca, pp. 52–3. Cf. Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus, §135, 5–8: "Meditate therefore on these things and things like them night and day by yourself, and with someone similar to yourself, and you shall be disturbed, either awake or asleep, but you shall live like a god among men." Ibid, §123, 1–2: "That which I used constantly to recommend to you, put it into practice and meditate upon it [meletai], considering them to be the elements of the living well." Ibid, §124, 7–8: "Become accustomed [suneithize] to considering that death is nothing to us."


For instance, the Ratae Sententiae or Kuriai Doxai ["Principal Doctrines"], which were known to Cicero (On Ends, 2, 20), and the Gnom. Vat.

On the curriculum in the Epicurean school, see above.

Epicurus, Letter to Pythocles, §85 = Long and Sedley, Hellenistic Philosophers, section 18 C (1), vol. 1, pp. 91–2; Greek text, vol. 2, p. 94. Cf. Letter to Herodatus, §37: "I recommend . . . constant occupation in the investigation of the science of nature, since I consider that this activity provides the greatest serenity in life."

Lucretius, On the Nature of Things, 3, 16f, 28ff. This passage is quite remarkable. On the one hand, it illustrates the fact that Epicurean physics was a true source of pleasure for the sage: it allowed him to have a grandiose imaginative vision of the formation and dissolution of the universe in the infinity of space. On the other, it throws light on one of the most fundamental feelings of the human experience: horror in the face of the enigma of nature. One thinks of Goethe’s formulation in Faust, Part 2, 6272ff: "The shudder is the best part of man. However dearly the world makes him pay for it, he feels the Prodigious deep inside, seized with astonishment."


Epicurus, Gnom. Vat., §75: "The saying, 'Wait till the end of a long life' (to know if you’ve been happy) is ungrateful towards the good things of the past." Cf. ibid, §69; §19: "He who has forgotten yesterday’s good fortune is already an old man."

Cf. E. Hoffmann, "Epikur," in M. Dessoir, ed., Die Geschichte der Philosophie, vol. 1, Wiesbaden 1925, p. 223: "Existence is to be considered, first and foremost, as a pure accident, so that it may then be lived as a completely unique
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miracle. We must first realize that existence, inevitably, is a one-shot affair, in order to be able to celebrate that in it which is irreplaceable and unique."


74 Horace, Odes, I, 11, 7: "Dum loquimur, fugerit invida / aetas: carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero." Cf. ibid, 2, 16, 25: "A soul content with the present."


78 Festugière, Epicure, p. 69.

79 The prehistory of spiritual exercises is to be sought, first of all, in traditional rules of life and popular exhortation (cf. I. Hadot, Seneca, pp. 10-22). Must we go back further still, and look for it first of all in Pythagoreanism, and then, beyond Pythagoras, in magico-religious/shamanistic traditions of respiratory techniques and mnemonic exercises? This theory, defended by E.R. Dodds, The Greeks and the Irrational (= Sather Classical Lectures 25), 3rd edn, Berkeley/London 1963; L. Gernet, Anthropologie de la Grèce antique, Paris 1968, pp. 423-5; J.-P. Vernant, Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs, Paris 1971, pp. 94ff, 108ff; M. Détienne, De la pensée religieuse à la pensée philosophique. La notion de Daimon dans le pythagorisme ancien, Paris 1963; M. Détienne, Les maîtres de vérité dans la Grèce archaïque, Paris 1967, pp. 124ff; H. Joly, Le renversement platonicien, Paris 1974, pp. 67-70; is entirely plausible. However, I shall not go into the matter here, first of all owing to my lack of competence in the field of the anthropology of prehistory and of archaic Greece, and secondly, because it seems to me that the problems inherent in the history of Pythagoreanism are extremely complex, so that it presupposes a rigorous criticism of our sources (many of which are late, idyllic projections, reflecting Stoic and Platonic concepts). Thirdly, the spiritual exercises under discussion here are mental processes which have nothing in common with cataleptic trances, but, on the contrary, respond to a rigorous demand for rational control, a demand which, as far as we are concerned, emerges with the figure of Socrates.

80 The historical Socrates is a probably insoluble enigma. But the figure of Socrates, as it is sketched by Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes, is a well-attested historical fact. When, in what follows, I speak of "Socrates," I shall be referring to this figure of Socrates. See below, ch. 5, "The Figure of Socrates."

81 By using quotation marks, I wish to underline the fact that we are not dealing with authentically Socratic dialogues, but with literary compositions which imitate – more or less faithfully – the dialogues of Socrates, or in which the figure of Socrates plays a role. It is in this sense that Plato's dialogues are Socratic.
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83 Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations*, 183b8: “Socrates used to ask questions and not to answer them – for he used to confess that he did not know.” Cf. Plato, *Apology*, 21d5: “I do not think that I know what I do not know.”
84 Plato, *Apology*, 30e1–5: “If you put me to death, you will not easily find anyone to take my place... God has specially appointed me to this city, as though it were a large thoroughbred horse which... needs the stimulation of some stinging fly.”
86 Ibid, 29d5–e3. Cf. 30a6–b1: “For I spend my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls.”
89 In this respect, Stoic exhortation remains Socratic. More than one of Epictetus’ *Discourses* seems to imitate the Socratic style; cf., for instance, *Discourses*, I, 11, 1–40. Epictetus praises the Socratic method pt 2, 12, 5–16, but he emphasizes that, in his day, it is no longer easy to practice it: “Nowadays, especially in Rome, it is not at all a safe business” (2, 12, 17; 24). Epictetus pictures a philosopher trying to have a Socratic dialogue with a consular personage, and ending up receiving a fist in the face. If we can trust Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, 2, 21, a similar incident had happened to Socrates himself.
91 Plato, *Symposium*, 174d.
92 Plato, ibid, 220c–d.
93 Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 700–6, 761–3; cf. 740–5. As a matter of fact, the true meaning of these verses is not entirely clear. They could be interpreted as an allusion to an exercise of mental concentration; this is the view of G. Méautis, *L’âme hellénique*, Paris 1932, p. 183; A.-J. Festugière, *Contemplation et vie contemplative selon Platon*, 2nd edn, Paris 1950, pp. 67–73; W. Schmid, “Das Sokratesbild der Wolken,” *Phitologus* 97 (1948), pp. 209–28; A.E. Taylor, *Vaina Socratica*, Oxford 1911, pp. 129–75. The terms *phrontizein* and *ekphrontizein*, used in Aristophanes’ description, became – perhaps under Aristophanes’ influence – technical terms for designating Socrates’ habits. Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 220c: Socrates stays standing, *phrontizon ti*; Xenophon, *Symposium*, 6, 6: Socrates is nicknamed the *phrontistes*. But it is not certain that, in Aristophanes, this *phrontizein* corresponds to an exercise of meditation directed towards oneself. In the first place, the comparison with the may-beetle gives us to understand that thought takes flight toward “elevated” things. In his *Symposium*, Xenophon tells us it relates to the “*meteora,*” in other words to celestial phenomena (cf. Plato, *Apology*, 18b). Secondly, in the *Clouds*, Strepsiades *phrontizei* about the means he will use to settle a business affair, not about himself. It is more a question of the methodology of research (cf. 1. 742: *divide and examine*). The most interesting detail seems to me to be the phrase: “If you come up against an insoluble point,
jump to another” (702–4), repeated at 743ff: “If an idea gets you into any difficulty, let go of it, withdraw for a bit, then submit it to your judgment again, shift it around and weigh it carefully.” This means that, when one arrives at an aporia, one must take up the question again, from a new point of departure. This method is constantly applied in the Platonic dialogues, as has been shown by René Schaerer, La Question platonicienne. Études sur les rapports de la pensée et de l’expressions dans les Dialogues (= Mémoires de l’Université de Neuchâtel 10), 2nd edn with postscript, Neuchâtel 1969, pp. 84–7; citing Meno, 79c; Phaedo, 105b; Theaetetus, 187a–b; Philebus, 60a. As Schaerer points out (p. 86), we have to do with a process “which forces the mind indefatigably to turn around in circles, in search of the True.” It is perhaps this aspect of Socratic methodology which explains Aristophanes’ allusions to detours and circuits of thought. Be this as it may, this method is also discernible in Aristotle, as we can see by the examples collected by H. Bonitz, Index aristotelicus, Berlin 1870, repr. Graz 1955, col. 111, 35ff: “Taking another point of departure, we shall say.” We find Plotinus using the same method, for instance in Ennead, 5, 8, 4, 45; 5, 8, 13, 24; 6, 4, 16, 47. On Aristotle, cf. the remarks of I. Düring, “Aristotle and the heritage from Plato,” Eratos 62 (1964), pp. 84–99.

94 Diogenes Laertius, Lives of the Philosophers, 6, 6. Ancient man frequently spoke to himself out loud. Some examples: Pyrrho in Diogenes Laertius 9, 64 (= Long and Sedley, Hellenistic Philosophers, 1A, vol. 1, p. 13; vol. 2, p. 3): “When once discovered talking to himself, he was asked the reason, and said that he was training to be virtuous.” Philo of Athens, in Diogenes Laertius, Lives of the Philosophers, 9, 69: “Philo . . . had a habit of very often talking to himself . . . that is why Timon says of him: ‘Philo . . . he who, apart from mankind, used to speak and converse with himself, with no concern for glory or disputes.’” Cleanthes, in Diogenes Laertius, Lives of the Philosophers, 7, 171: [Cleanthes] used often to scold himself out loud. Upon hearing him, Ariston once asked him: ‘Who are you scolding?’ Cleanthes laughed and replied, ‘Some old man who has grey hair but no brains.’” Horace, Satires, 1, 4, 137: “Thus, with lips shut tight, I debate with myself.” (“Haec ego mecum compressis agit ab libris.”) Epictetus, Discourses, 3, 14, 2: “Man – if you really are a man – then walk by yourself, talk to yourself, and don’t hide yourself in the chorus.” On meditating while walking, cf. Horace, Letter, 1, 4, 4-5: “strolling peacefully amid the healthful woods, bearing in mind all the thoughts worthy of a sage and a good man.” – On the problems posed by interior and exterior dialogue with oneself, see F. Leo, “Der Monolog im Drama,” Abhandlungen der Göttingen. Gesellschaft der Wissenschaft. NF 10, 5 (1908); Wolfgang Schadewalt, Monolog und Selbstgespäch. Untersuchungen zur Formgeschichte der griechischen Tragödie, Berlin 1926; F. Dirlmeier, “Vom Monolog der Dichtung zum ‘inneren’ Logos bei Platon und Aristoteles,” in Ausgewählte Schriften zu Dichtung und Philosophie der Griechen, Heidelberg 1970, pp. 142–54; G. Misch, Geschichte der Autobiographie, vol. I, Berlin 1949, pp. 86, 94, 363, 380, 426, 450, 468. Concerning the prehistory of this spiritual exercise, one may note Homer, Odyssey, 20, 17–23:
He struck himself on the chest and spoke to his heart and scolded it:
"Bear up, my heart. You have had worse to endure before this
on that day when the irresistible Cyclops ate up my strong companions . . . ."
So he spoke, addressing his own dear heart within him;
and the heart in great obedience endured and stood it
without complaint, but the man himself was twisting and turning.

This passage is quoted by Plato, Republic, 441b: "there Homer has clearly
represented that in us which has reflected about the better and the worse as
rebuking that which feels unreasoning anger as if it were a distinct and different
thing." Cf. Phaedo, 94d–e.
95 Thus, according to Porphyry, Life of Plotinus, 8, 19: "Plotinus was present at the
same time to himself and to others." [On this theme, see Pierre Hadot, Platon ou
la simplicité du regard, 3rd edn, Paris 1989. An English translation of this work is
in preparation. – Trans.]
96 Plato, Meno, 75c–d.
97 V. Goldschmidt, Les dialogues de Platon. Structure et méthode dialectique
(=Bibliothèque de philosophie contemporaine, Histoire de la Philosophie et
98 See above. In La Question platonicienne, pp. 84–7, Schaerer has admirably
demonstrated the significance of this Platonic method.
Schaerer, La Question platonicienne, p. 86. For the perspective we are adopting,
these two works are of fundamental importance.
100 Plato, Republic, 450b.
101 "The dialogue's goal is more to form than to inform," writes Goldschmidt, Les
dialogues, p. 3, citing Plato, Statesman, 285–6. Cf. ibid., pp. 162–3; Schaerer, La
Question platonicienne, p. 216.
102 Plato, Statesman, 285c–d.
103 Ibid, 286d. In the words of Schaerer (La Question platonicienne, p. 87): "Definitions
are worthless in and of themselves. Their entire value consists in the road
travelled to achieve them. Along the way, the interlocutor acquires more mental
penetration (Sophist, 227a–b), more confidence (Theaetetus, 187b), and more
skillfulness in all things (Statesman, 285dff). His soul is thereby purified, as he
rejects the opinions which formerly barred the way to enlightenment (Sophist,
230b–c). But whatever words one uses to designate this dialectical progress, it
always takes place in the soul of the interlocutor – and, by the same token, in the
soul of the intelligent reader."
79–80, 292, and 341: "The Republic solves the problem of Justice and its
advantages. At the same time, and by the same token, it urges us on towards
Justice." On the exhortatory character of the dialogues, see K. Gaiser, Protreptik
und Paränese bei Platon. Untersuchungen zur Form des platonischen Dialogs,
105 Plato, Meno, 81e.
106 Plato, Republic, 505c.
107 The dialectical exercise, as it rids our thought of the illusions of the senses, brings about the apprenticeship for death which we are about to discuss; cf. Plato, Phaedo, 83a.


110 Plato, Apology, 28b–30b.

111 Plato, Phaedo, 67c. Cf. ibid, 64a, 80e.

112 Plato, ibid, 67c. Note the use of the verb “to accustom” (ethisa), which presupposes the practice of exercises.

113 Cf. above.

114 Cf. Plato, Phaedo, 84a: “The philosophical soul calms the sea of the passions, following the course of reasoning and always being present within it, contemplat-ing and drawing nourishment from the true, the divine, and that which is not subject to opinion.” Cf. ibid, 65c, 66c, 79c, 81b, 83b–d.

115 Plato, Republic, 571d.

116 Plato, Republic, 571d–572a.

117 Plato, Phaedo, 64a–b. This is probably an allusion to Aristophanes, Clouds, verses 103, 504.

118 La Rochefoucauld, Maximes, no. 26.

119 Horace, Letter, I, 4, 13–14: “Omnem crede diem tibi diluxisse supremum; gratia superveniet quae non sperabitur hora.” Once again, we encounter the Epicurean theme of gratitude.

120 Michel de Montaigne, Essays, bk I, ch. 20, vol. 1, p. 87 Villey/Saulnier = vol. 1, p. 111 Ives. Cf. Seneca, Letter, 26, 8: “Meanwhile Epicurus will oblige me with these words: ‘Think on death,’ or rather, if you prefer the phrase, on ‘migration to heaven.’ The meaning is clear – that it is a wonderful thing to learn thoroughly how to die . . . ‘think on death.’ In saying this, he bids us think on freedom . . . He who has learned to die has un-learned slavery. [Qui mori didicit, servire dedidicit.]” As we can see, the Stoic Seneca borrowed the maxim “Mediare mortem” from Epicurus.

121 Epictetus, Manual, ch. 21. Cf. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 2, 11: “Let your every deed and word and thought be those of one who might depart from this life this very moment.”

122 See above.

123 Cf. A. de Waehrens, La philosophie de Martin Heidegger (= Bibliothèque Philosophique de Louvain 2), 4th edn, Louvain 1955, pp. 135–51; and especially Heidegger, Sein und Zeit, §53, pp. 260ff. As R. Brague pointed out in his review of the first edition of this work (Études philosophiques, 1982), Heidegger here “is careful to distinguish Being-for-Death from the meditatio mortis.” It is perfectly true that Heideggerian Being-for-Death only takes on its full meaning within the perspective particular to Heidegger; it is nonetheless true that we have here a system which makes of the anticipation or forestalling of death a precondition of authentic existence. We must not forget that in Platonic philosophy, the point is
not simply to think about death, but to carry out a training for dying which is, in reality, a training for life.

124 Cf. Plato, Republic, 525c, 532b8, and especially 518c: "the true analogy for this indwelling power in the soul and the organ whereby each of us learns is that of an eye that could not be converted to the light from the darkness except by turning the whole body. Even so this organ of knowledge must be turned around from the world of becoming together with the entire soul... until it is able to endure the contemplation of that which is. Education is the art of turning this eye of the soul."

125 Plato, Republic, 604b–d.

126 Should we call this exercise already Stoic, or should we rather say that Stoic exercises are still Platonic?

127 Plato, Republic, 486a. This passage is quoted by Marcus Aurelius in his Meditations, 7, 35.


129 Aristotle, Parts of Animals, 2, 3, 5, 645a 9–10.

130 See above.

131 Epictetus, Discourses, I, 6, 19–25: "God has brought man into the world to be a spectator of himself and his works, and not merely a spectator, but also an interpreter... Nature... did not end [i.e. in the case of mankind] until she reached contemplation and understanding and a manner of life harmonious with nature. Take heed, therefore, lest you die without ever having been spectators of these things. You are willing to travel to Olympia to look at the work of Pheidias, and each of you regards it as a misfortune to die without seeing such sights; yet when there is no need to travel at all, when you have such works near you and under your noses, will you not yearn to look at these works and know them? Will you consequently refuse to learn either who you are, or for what you have been born, or what is the meaning of the spectacle to which you have been admitted?"


133 Plutarch, On Peace of Mind, §20, 477c.


135 Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 12, 24. Cf. ibid, 9, 30: “Contemplate from up above.”


137 Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 8, 54; 9, 32.

138 Plotinus, Ennead, 6, 5, 12, 19–29.

139 For example, Plotinus, Ennead, 1, 2; Porphyry, Sentences, ch. 32; Macrobius, Commentary on the Dream of Scipio, 1, 8, 3–11; Olympiodorus, Commentary on Plato’s Phaedo, pp. 23, 25ff, 45, 14ff. Cf. O. Schissel von Fleschenberg, Marinos von Neapoli und die neuplatonischen Tugendgrade, Athens 1928, with the review by W. Theiler in Gnomon 5 (1929), pp. 307–17; I. Hadot, Le problème du néoplatonisme alexandrin, Hiéroclès et Simplicius, Paris 1978, pp. 152ff. On the important role played by this theme in the systematization of Christian mysticism, see H. van Lieshout, La théorie plotinienne de la vertu. Essai sur la genèse
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d’un article de la Somme Théologique de saint Thomas, Fribourg 1926, as well as the texts cited in P. Henry, Plotin et l’Occident. Firmicus Maternus, Marius Victorinus, Saint Augustin et Macrobre (= Spicilegium sacrum Lovaniense, Études et Documents 15), Louvain 1934, pp. 248–50.
140 Marinus, Life of Proclus, chs 14, 18, 21, 22, 24, 28.
142 Porphyry, On Abstinence, I, 30.
143 Ibid, I, 29 (physiosis kai zoe).
144 Plotinus, Ennead, 1, 5, 7, 10, 28–32.
145 Ibid, 1, 6, 9, 8–26.
146 To put this observation into relation with what we have said above, we may say that the spirit of Platonism consists precisely in making knowledge into a spiritual exercise. In order to know, one must transform oneself.
147 As, for example, at Ennead, 5, 8, 11, 1–39. As has been shown by P. Merlan, Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness. Problems of the Soul in the Neo-aristotelian and Neoplatonic Tradition (= Archives internationaux d’Histoire des idées 2), The Hague 1963, this experiential knowledge of the Intellect has much in common with certain aspects of the Aristotelian tradition.
148 Plotinus, Ennead, 6, 7, 36, 6–9.
149 Ibid, 6, 7, 33, 1–2.
150 Ibid, 6, 7, 34, 2–4.
151 Ibid, 5, 3, 17, 38.
152 Ibid, 6, 9, 10, 14–17. At this point, we ought to take into account the entire post-Plotinian tradition. Perhaps it will suffice to recall that Damascius’ Life of Isidore, one of the last works of the Neoplatonic school, is full of allusions to spiritual exercises.
153 This comparison is quite frequent in Epicetus; cf. Discourses, 1, 4, 13; 2, 17, 29; 3, 21, 3. The metaphor of the Olympic games of the soul is also quite common; cf. Epicetus, Manual, ch. 51, 2; Plato, Phaedrus, 256b; Porphyry, On Abstinence, 1, 31.
154 According to J. Delorme, Gymnasion, Paris 1960, pp. 316ff, 466: “Athletic exercises were always accompanied by intellectual exercises.”
155 Cf. above.
157 Plato, Republic, 611d–e.
159 Cf. Lucretius, 5, 8 (referring to Epicurus): “He was a god” (Deus ille fuit); Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus, §§135; 23, J, Long and Sedley, Hellenistic Philosophers vol. 2, p. 152; vol. 1, p. 144: “You will live like a god among men.”
161 Heidegger’s analyses of the authentic and inauthentic modes of existence can help to understand this situation; cf. A. de Waehrens, La philosophie de Martin Heidegger, pp. 109, 169.
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162 [On conversion, cf. above. -- Trans.]
163 Diogenes Laertius, Lives of the Philosophers, 6, 103.
164 DAMASCUS, Life of Isidorus, §147, p. 127, 12–13 Zinzten.
165 Sextus Empiricus, Against the Logicians, 2, vol. 2, pp. 426–8 Bury; Against the Physicists, 1, vol. 3, pp. 26–8 Bury; Against the Physicists, 2, vol. 3, p. 292 Bury; Outlines of Pyrrhonism, vol. 1, pp. 324–6 Bury. Cf. Diogenes Laertius, Lives of the Philosophers, 9, 61–2: "He lived in conformity with everyday life [bios]." Such was Pyrrho's life-style, which, at least on the surface, was not very different from the average man's: "He lived in fraternal piety with his sister, a midwife ... now and then even taking things for sale to market, poultry or pigs for instance, and with complete indifference he would clean the house. It is said that he was so indifferent that he washed a piglet himself." (Diogenes Laertius, Lives of the Philosophers, 9, 66.) All that mattered was one's inner attitude; therefore the sage conformed to "life," i.e. to the opinions of non-philosophers. But he did so with indifference, that is, with an inner freedom which preserved his serenity and peace of mind. This is, incidentally, the same Pyrrho who, when frightened by a dog, replied to his mocking onlookers: "It is difficult to strip oneself completely of being human." (Diogenes Laertius, Lives of the Philosophers, 9, 66, fr. 1C Long and Sedley, Hellenistic Philosophers, vol. 1, p. 14; vol. 2, p. 3.)
166 Cf., with regard to Plato, V. Goldschmidt, "Sur le problème du 'système de Platon',' Rivista critica di storia della filosofia 5(1959), pp. 169–78. The recent researches of K. Gaiser and H.-J. Krämer on Plato's unwritten teachings have once again raised doubts about the existence of systematic thought in antiquity.
167 Plato, Phaedrus, 264c.
169 Cf. I. Düring, "Von Aristoteles bis Leibniz. Einige Haupttinnien in der Geschichte des Aristotelismus," in P. Mordux, ed., Aristoteles in der neuren Forschung (= Wege der Forschung 61), Darmstadt 1968, p. 259: "In reality, Aristotle thought in terms of problems: he was a creator of methods, a pedagogue, and an organizer of collaborative scientific work. He did, of course, have strong systematic tendencies, but what he was striving after was a systematic way of approaching problems ... The idea of creating a self-contained system, however, never even entered his mind."
171 See above.
172 Düring, Aristoteles, p. 41, n. 253.
173 Ibíd, pp. 5, 289, 433.
174 Porphyry, Life of Plotinus, 4, 11; 5, 60.
175 Cf., for instance, with regard to Plotinus' doctrine of the soul, Henry Blumenthal, "Soul, world-soul, and individual soul in Plotinus," in Le néoplatonisme, 1971.
177 Cf. the quotation from Chrysippus' Therapeutikos in SVF 3, § 474, pp. 124–5, taken from Origen, Against Celsus, I, 64; 8, 51. Note how Origen introduces his
citation: "Chrysippus . . . in his endeavours to restrain the passions of the human soul, not pretending to determine what doctrines are the true ones, says that those who have been brought under the dominion of the passions are to be treated according to the principles of the various schools." On this theme, cf. I. Hadot, Seneca, pp. 3, 21, 44, 54, 83; 1969b, p. 351. We ought therefore not to be surprised to find the Stoic Seneca utilizing Epicurean aphorisms to exhort his disciple Lucilius; cf. I. Hadot, Seneca, p. 83. A concrete example of this parenetic eclecticism may be found in the manuscript Vaticanus Graecus 1950. According to Festugière, La révélation, vol. 2, p. 90, n. 2: "It is interesting to note that the second half of Vat. gr. 1950 . . . which forms an independent whole, contains the Memorabilia of Xenophon (f. 280ff), followed by the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius (f. 341ff), then the Manual of Epictetus (f. 392"), and finally, after a page of rhetorical pieces (f. 401), the collection of Epicurean aphorisms entitled Gnomologium Vaticanum (f. 401'ff.). This whole ensemble, including the selections from Epicurus, is the work of a Stoic, who has gathered together for his personal use a number of fundamental texts on moral doctrine — a kind of 'book of devotion', as it were. Now, the first item on the list is the Socrates of the Memorabilia."

178 Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 9, 39; 4, 3, 2.

179 See above.

180 Augustine, On the Trinity, 15, 6, 10: "Quia in nobis fiunt vel in nobis sunt, cum ista meminimus, aspicimus, volimus." Memory, knowledge, and will are, for Augustine, the three trinitary images. On the exercitatio animi ("exercise of the soul") in Augustine, see H.-I. Marrou, Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique, Paris 1938, p. 299.

181 On the utilization of the word philosophia in Christianity, see A.N. Malingrey, "Philosophia." Étude d'un groupe de mots dans la littérature grecque, des Présocratiques au IVe siècle ap. J.-C., Paris 1961. Clement of Alexandria is one of the best witnesses for the ancient tradition of spiritual exercises. He emphasizes the importance of the master–disciple relationship (Stromata, I, 1, 9, 1), the value of psychagogy (ibid, I, 2, 20, 1), and the need for exercises and a hunt after the truth (ibid, I, 2, 21, 1: "the truth reveals itself full of sweetness when one has searched for it and obtained it at the cost of great efforts.")

182 For H. Happ, Hyle, Berlin 1971, p. 66, n. 282, the concern for "systems" goes back to Francisco de Suarez (1548–1617).


184 Vauvenargues, Réflexions et maximes, §400 [Luc de Clapiers, Marquis de Vauvenargues (1715–1747), friend of Voltaire. – Trans.], together with §398: "Every thought is new when the author expresses it in his own way," and above all §399: "There are many things we do not know well enough, and that it is good to have repeated."
185 "It is contained in the very briefest statements," says Plato, speaking of the essence of his own doctrine (Seventh Letter, 334e). "The essence of philosophy is the spirit of simplicity... always and everywhere, complication is superficial, construction is an accessory, and synthesis an appearance. Philosophizing is a simple act" (Henri Bergson, La pensée et le mouvant, Paris 1946, p. 139).

186 Epictetus, Discourses, 3, 21, 7–8.

Ancient Spiritual Exercises and “Christian Philosophy”

It was the great merit of Paul Rabbow to have shown, in his Seelenführung, in what sense the methods of meditation set forth and practiced in Ignatius of Loyola’s Exercitium spiritualia were deeply rooted in the spiritual exercises of ancient philosophy. Rabbow begins his book by discussing the various techniques by means of which rhetoricians throughout antiquity sought to persuade their audiences. These included, for example, oratorical amplification and lifelike, stirring descriptions of events. Above all, Rabbow gives a remarkable analysis of the exercises practiced by the Stoics and Epicureans, emphasizing the point that they were spiritual exercises of the same kind as we find in Ignatius of Loyola. On both these points, Rabbow’s book opened the way to new areas of research. It is possible, however, that even the author himself did not foresee all the consequences of his discovery.

In the first place, Rabbow seems to me to have linked the phenomenon of spiritual exercises too closely to what he terms the “inward orientation” (Innenwendung) which, he claims, took place in the Greek mentality in the third century BC, and which manifested itself in the development of the Stoic and Epicurean schools. As a matter of fact, however, this phenomenon was much more widespread. We can already detect its outlines in the Socratic/Platonic dialogues, and it continues right up until the end of antiquity. The reason for this is that it is linked to the very essence of ancient philosophy. It is philosophy itself that the ancients thought of as a spiritual exercise.

If Rabbow tends to limit the extent of spiritual exercises to the Hellenistic/Roman period, the reason is perhaps that he restricts himself to considering their ethical aspect alone. Moreover, he considers ethics only in philosophies like Stoicism and Epicureanism, which appear to accord pre-
dominance to ethical questions in their instruction. In fact, Rabbow goes so far as to define spiritual exercises as moral exercises:

By “moral exercise,” we mean a procedure or determinate act, intended to influence oneself, carried out with the express goal of achieving a determinate moral effect. It always looks beyond itself, in as much as it repeats itself, or at least is linked together with other acts to form a methodical ensemble.5

With the advent of Christianity, Rabbow continues, these moral exercises were transformed into spiritual exercises:

Spiritual exercises, then, which resemble moral exercises like a twin, both in essence and structure, were raised to their classical rigor and perfection in the Exercitia spiritualia of Ignatius of Loyola. Spiritual exercises thus belong properly to the religious sphere, since their goal is to fortify, maintain, and renew life “in the Spirit,” the vita spiritualis.6

Christian spiritual exercises did indeed take on a new meaning by virtue of the specific character of Christian spirituality, inspired as it is by the death of Christ and the Trinitarian life of the divine Persons. But to speak, apropos of the philosophical exercises of antiquity, of simple “moral exercises” is to misunderstand their importance and significance. As we showed above, these exercises have as their goal the transformation of our vision of the world, and the metamorphosis of our being. They therefore have not merely a moral, but also an existential value. We are not just dealing here with a code of good moral conduct, but with a way of being, in the strongest sense of the term. In the last analysis, then, the term “spiritual exercises” is the best one, because it leaves no doubt that we are dealing with exercises which engage the totality of the spirit.7

Secondly, one gets the impression from reading Rabbow that Ignatius of Loyola rediscovered spiritual exercises thanks to the sixteenth-century renaissance of rhetorical studies.8 In fact, however, rhetoric for the ancients was only one of many ingredients of exercises which were first and foremost philosophical in the strict sense of the term. Moreover, ever since the first centuries of the church’s existence, Christian spirituality has been the heir of ancient philosophy and its spiritual practices. There was thus nothing to prevent Ignatius from finding the methodology for his Exercitia within the Christian tradition itself. In the following pages, we hope to show, with the help of a few quotations, in what way ancient spiritual exercises were preserved and transmitted by an entire current of ancient Christian thought: that current, namely, which defined Christianity itself as a philosophy.
Before we begin our study, we must be more specific about the notion of spiritual exercises. "Exercise" corresponds to the Greek terms *askesis* or *melete*. Let us be clear at the outset about the limits of the present inquiry: we shall not be discussing "asceticism" in the modern sense of the word, as it is defined, for instance, by Heussi: "Complete abstinence or restriction in the use of food, drink, sleep, dress, and property, and especially continence in sexual matters." Here, we must carefully distinguish between two different phenomena. On the one hand, there is the Christian — and subsequently modern — use of the word "asceticism", as we have just seen it defined. On the other, there is use of the word *askesis* in ancient philosophy. For ancient philosophers, the word *askesis* designated exclusively the spiritual exercises we have discussed above: inner activities of the thought and the will. Whether or not sexual or alimentary practices analogous to those of Christian asceticism existed among certain ancient philosophers — the Cynics, for example, or the Neoplatonists — is a wholly different question. Such practices have nothing to do with philosophical thought-exercises. This question has been competently dealt with by many authors, who have shown both the analogies and the differences between asceticism (in the modern sense of the word) in ancient philosophy and in Christianity. What we propose to examine here is rather the way in which *askesis*, in the *philosophical* sense of the term, was received into Christianity.

In order to understand the phenomenon under consideration, it is essential to recall that there was a widespread Christian tradition which portrayed Christianity as a *philosophy*. This assimilation began with those Christian writers of the second century who are usually referred to as the Apologists, and in particular with Justin. The Apologists considered Christianity a philosophy, and to mark its opposition to Greek philosophy, they spoke of Christianity as "our philosophy" or as "Barbarian philosophy." They did not, however, consider Christianity to be just one philosophy among others; they thought of it as *the* philosophy. They believed that that which had been scattered and dispersed throughout Greek philosophy had been synthesized and systematized in Christian philosophy. Each Greek philosopher, they wrote, had possessed only a portion of the *Logos*, whereas the Christians were in possession of the *Logos* itself, incarnated in Jesus Christ. If to do philosophy was to live in accordance with the law of reason, then the Christians were philosophers, since they lived in conformity with the law of the divine *Logos*.

Clement of Alexandria dwells at length on this theme. He establishes a close link between philosophy and *paideia*, by which he means the education of mankind. Already within Greek philosophy, the *Logos*, or divine pedagogue, had been at work educating humanity, but Christianity itself, as the complete revelation of the *Logos*, was the true philosophy, which "teaches us to conduct ourselves so that we may resemble God, and to accept the divine plan [oikonomia] as the guiding principle of all our education."
The identification of Christianity with true philosophy inspired many aspects of the teaching of Origen, and it remained influential throughout the Origenist tradition, especially among the Cappadocian Fathers: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa. It is also in evidence in John Chrysostom.\textsuperscript{17} All these authors speak of “our philosophy”; of the “complete philosophy”; or of “the philosophy according to Christ.”

We may well ask ourselves if such an identification was legitimate, and wonder whether it did not contribute to a large extent to the notorious “Hellenization” of Christianity, about which so much has been written. I will not go into this complex problem here, but shall limit myself to pointing out that in portraying Christianity as a philosophy, this tradition was the heir – almost certainly consciously so – of a tendency already at work in the Jewish tradition, particularly in Philo of Alexandria.\textsuperscript{18} Philo portrayed Judaism as a \textit{patrios philosophia}: the traditional philosophy of the Jewish people. The same terminology was used by Flavius Josephus.\textsuperscript{19}

When, a few centuries later, monasticism came to represent the culmination of Christian perfection, it, too, could be portrayed as a \textit{philosophia}. From the fourth century on, this is exactly how it was in fact described, by church Fathers such as Gregory Nazianzen,\textsuperscript{20} Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom,\textsuperscript{21} and especially by Evagrius Ponticus.\textsuperscript{22} This viewpoint was still current in the fifth century, for instance in Theodoret of Cyrhus.\textsuperscript{23}

Here again, it was Philo of Alexandria who had shown the way. He had given the name “philosophers” to the Therapeutae, who, according to his description,\textsuperscript{24} lived in solitude, meditating on the law and devoting themselves to contemplation. Jean Leclercq\textsuperscript{25} has shown that, under the influence of Greek tradition, the monastic life continued to be designated by the term \textit{philosophia} throughout the Middle Ages. Thus, a Cistercian monastic text tells us that Bernard of Clairvaux used to initiate his disciples “into the disciplines of celestial philosophy.”\textsuperscript{26} Finally, John of Salisbury maintained that it was the monks who “philosophized” in the most correct and authentic way.\textsuperscript{27}

The importance of this assimilation between Christianity and philosophy cannot be over-emphasized. Let us be clear on one point, however: there can be no question of denying the incomparable originality of Christianity. We shall return to this point later; in particular, we shall emphasize the specifically Christian character of this “philosophy,” as well as the care Christians have taken to connect it with the biblical/evangelical tradition. Moreover, the tendency to assimilation was confined within strict historical limits, and always linked more or less closely to the tradition of the Apologists and of Origen. This tendency did, however, exist; its importance was considerable, and its result was the introduction of philosophical spiritual exercises into Christianity.

Along with its absorption of spiritual exercises, Christianity acquired a specific style of life, spiritual attitude, and tonality, which had been absent
from primitive Christianity. This fact is highly significant: it shows that if Christianity was able to be assimilated to a philosophy, the reason was that philosophy itself was already, above all else, a way of being and a style of life. As Jean Leclercq points out: “In the monastic Middle Ages, just as much as in Antiquity, *philosophia* did not designate a theory or a means of knowledge, but a lived, experienced wisdom, and a way of living according to reason.”

We remarked above that the fundamental attitude of the Stoic philosopher was *prosoche*: attention to oneself and vigilance at every instant. For the Stoics, the person who is “awake” is always perfectly conscious not only of what he *does*, but of what he *is*. In other words, he is aware of his place in the universe and of his relationship to God. His self-consciousness is, first and foremost, a moral consciousness.

A person endowed with such consciousness seeks to purify and rectify his intentions at every instant. He is constantly on the lookout for signs within himself of any motive for action other than the will to do good. Such self-consciousness is not, however, merely a moral conscience; it is also cosmic consciousness. The “attentive” person lives constantly in the presence of God and is constantly remembering God, joyfully consenting to the will of universal reason, and he sees all things with the eyes of God himself.

Such is the philosophical attitude *par excellence*. It is also the attitude of the Christian philosopher. We encounter this attitude already in Clement of Alexandria, in a passage which foreshadows the spirit which was later to reign in philosophically-inspired monasticism: “It is necessary that divine law inspire fear, so that the philosopher may acquire and conserve peace of mind [*amerinnia*], by dint of prudence [*eulabheia*] and attention to himself [*prosoche*], and that he may remain exempt from sins and falls in all things.” For Clement, the divine law is simultaneously the universal reason of the philosophers, and the divine word of the Christians. It inspires fear, not in the sense of a passion – which, as such, would be condemned by the Stoics – but rather in the sense of a certain circumspection in thought and action. Such attention to oneself brings about *amerinnia* or peace of mind, one of the most sought-after goals in monasticism.

Attention to oneself is the subject of a very important sermon by Basil of Caesarea. Basil bases his sermon on the Greek version of a passage from *Deuteronomy*: “Give heed to yourself, lest there be a hidden word in your heart.” On this basis, Basil develops an entire theory of *prosoche*, strongly influenced by the Stoic and Platonic traditions. We shall return to this point later. For the moment, let us simply note that Basil’s reason for commenting on this particular passage of *Deuteronomy* is that, for him, it evokes a technical term of ancient philosophy. For Basil, attention to oneself consists in awakening the rational principles of thought and action which God has placed in our souls. We are to watch over *ourselves* – that is, over our spirit and our soul – and not over that which is *ours* (our body) or that which is *round about*
us (our possessions). Thus, *prosoche* consists in paying attention to the beauty of our souls, by constantly renewing the examination of our conscience and our knowledge of ourselves. By so doing, we can correct the judgments we bring upon ourselves. If we think we are rich and noble, we are to recall that we are made of earth, and ask ourselves where are the famous men who have preceded us now. If, on the contrary, we are poor and in disgrace, we are to take cognizance of the riches and splendors which the cosmos offers us: our body, the earth, the sky, and the stars, and we shall then be reminded of our divine vocation. It is not hard to recognize the philosophical character of these themes.

*Prosoche* or attention to oneself, the philosopher’s fundamental attitude, became the fundamental attitude of the monk. We can observe this phenomenon in Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*, written in AD 357. When describing the saint’s conversion to the monastic life, Athanasius simply says: “He began to pay attention to himself.” Antony himself, we read later, is supposed to have said to his disciples on his deathbed: “Live as though you were dying every day, paying heed to yourselves [*prosechontes heautois*] and remembering what you heard from my preaching.”

In the sixth century, Dorotheus of Gaza remarked: “We are so negligent that we do not know why we have gone out of the world . . . That is why we are not making progress . . . The reason for it is that there is no *prosoche* in our hearts.” As we have seen, attention and vigilance presuppose continuous concentration on the present moment, which must be lived as if it were, simultaneously, the first and last moment of life. Athanasius tells us that Antony used to make no attempt to remember the time he had already spent at his exercises, but rather made a brand new effort every day, as if starting afresh from zero. In other words, he lived the present moment as if it were his first, but also his last. We also saw that Antony told his disciples to “Live as though you were dying every day.” Athanasius reports another of Antony’s sayings: “If we live as if we were going to die each day, we will not commit sin.” We are to wake up thinking it possible that we may not make it until the evening, and go to sleep thinking that we shall not wake up. Epictetus had spoken along similar lines: “Let death be before your eyes every day, and you will never have any abject thought nor excessive desire.”

In the same vein, Marcus Aurelius wrote: “Let your every deed and word and thought be those of one who might depart from this life this very moment.” Dorotheus of Gaza also established a close link between *prosoche* and the imminence of death: “Let us pay heed to ourselves, brothers, and be vigilant while we still have time . . . Look! Since the time we sat down at this conference we have used up two or three hours of our time and got that much nearer to death. Yet though we see that we are losing time, we are not afraid!” And again: “Let us pay heed to ourselves and be vigilant, brothers. Who will give us back the present time if we waste it?”
Attention to the present is simultaneously control of one's thoughts, acceptance of the divine will, and the purification of one's intentions with regard to others. We have an excellent summary of this constant attention to the present in a well-known Meditation of Marcus Aurelius:

Everywhere and at all times, it is up to you to rejoice piously at what is occurring at the present moment, to conduct yourself with justice towards the people who are present here and now, and to apply rules of discernment [emphilotekhein] to your present representations [phantasiai], so that nothing slips in that is not objective.\textsuperscript{50}

We encounter the same continuous vigilance over both thought and intentions in monastic spirituality, where it is transformed into the “watch of the heart,”\textsuperscript{51} also known as nepsis\textsuperscript{52} or vigilance. We are not dealing here with a mere exercise of the moral conscience. Rather, prosoche relocates man within his genuine being: that is, his relationship to God. It is thus equivalent to the continuous exercise of the presence of God. In the words of Plotinus’ disciple Porphyry: “Let God be present as overseer and guardian of every action, deed and word!”\textsuperscript{53} Here we have one of the fundamental themes of philosophical prosoche: presence both to God and to oneself.

“Have your joy and your rest in one thing only: in progressing from one action done for the sake of others to another such act, always accompanied by the remembrance of God.”\textsuperscript{54} This Meditation of Marcus Aurelius has to do, once again, with the theme of exercises involving the presence of God. At the same time, it introduces to us an expression which was later to play an important role in monastic spirituality. The “remembrance of God” is a perpetual reference to God at each instant of life. Basil of Caesarea links it explicitly with the “watch of the heart”: “We must keep watch over our heart with all vigilance...to avoid ever losing the thought of God.”\textsuperscript{55} Diadochus of Photice often evokes this theme. For him, the remembrance of God is entirely equivalent to prosoche: “Only they know their failures who never let their intellects be distracted from the remembrance of God.”\textsuperscript{56} “Since then [i.e. since its fall], it is only with difficulty that the human intellect can remember God and His commandments.”\textsuperscript{57} We are to close off all the intellect’s avenues of escape, by means of the remembrance of God.\textsuperscript{58}

What distinguishes a man who is virtue’s friend is that he constantly consumes everything that is earthly in his heart by means of the remembrance of God, so that, bit by bit, the evil in it is dispersed by the fire of the remembrance of the Good, and his soul
returns in perfection to its natural brilliance; nay, even with increased splendor.\textsuperscript{59}

Clearly, remembrance of God is, in some sense, the very essence of prosoche. It is the most radical method for ensuring one's presence to God and to oneself.\textsuperscript{60} Vague intentions, however, are not sufficient for true attention to one's self. We noted that Diadochus of Photice speaks of the "remembrance of God and of His commandments." In ancient philosophy as well, prosoche required meditating on and memorizing rules of life (kanones), those principles which were to be applied in each particular circumstance, at each moment in life. It was essential to have the principles of life, the fundamental "dogmas," constantly "at hand."

We encounter this same theme once again in the monastic tradition. Here, however, philosophical dogmas are replaced by the Commandments as an evangelical rule of life, and the words of Christ, enunciating the principles of Christian life. Yet the rule of life could be inspired not only by the evangelical commandments, but also by the words of the "ancients;" in other words, of the first monks. We have only to recall Antony, on his deathbed, recommending that his disciples remember his exhortations.\textsuperscript{61} Evagrius Ponticus declares: "It is a very necessary thing... to examine carefully the ways of the monks who have traveled, in an earlier age, straight along the road and to direct oneself along the same paths."\textsuperscript{62}

Both the evangelical commandments and the words of the ancients were presented in the form of short sentences, which – just as in the philosophical tradition – could be easily memorized and meditated upon. The numerous collections of Apophthegmata and of Kephalaia we find in monastic literature are a response to this need for memorization and meditation. Apophthegmata\textsuperscript{63} were the famous sayings which the ancients – that is to say, the Desert Fathers – pronounced in specific circumstances. This literary genre was already in existence in the philosophical tradition, and we find numerous examples of it in the works of Diogenes Laertius. As for Kephalaia,\textsuperscript{64} these are collections of relatively short sentences, usually grouped into "centuries." This, too, was a literary genre much in vogue in traditional philosophical literature; some examples are Marcus Aurelius' Meditations and Porphyry's Sentences. Both these literary genres are responses to the requirements of meditation.

Like philosophical meditation, Christian meditation flourished by using all available means of rhetoric and oratorical amplification, and by mobilizing all possible resources of the imagination. Thus, for example, Evagrius Ponticus used to invite his disciples to imagine their own death, the decomposition of their bodies, the terrors and sufferings of their souls in Hell, and eternal fire; then, by way of contrast, they were to picture the happiness of the just.\textsuperscript{65}
Meditation must, in any case, be constant. Dorotheus of Gaza insists strongly on this point:

Meditate constantly on this advice in your hearts, Brothers. Study the words of the holy Elders.66

If we remember the sayings of the holy Elders, brothers, and meditate on them constantly, it will be difficult for us to sin.67

If you wish to possess these sayings at the opportune moment, meditate on them constantly.68

In the spiritual life, there is a kind of conspiracy between, on the one hand, normative sayings, which are memorized and meditated upon, and, on the other, the events which provide the occasion for putting them into practice. Dorotheus of Gaza promised his monks that, if they constantly meditated on the “works of the holy Elders,” they would “be able to profit from everything that happens to you, and to make progress by the help of God.”69 Dorotheus no doubt meant that after such meditation, his monks would be able to recognize the will of God in all events, thanks to the words of the Fathers, which were likewise inspired by the will of God.

Vigilance and self-attention clearly presuppose the practice of examining one's conscience. We have already seen, in the case of Basil of Caesarea,70 the close link between _prosoche_ and the examination of conscience. It seems that the practice of the examination of the conscience occurs for the first time, within the Christian tradition, in Origen's _Commentary on the Song of Songs_.71 In the course of his interpretation of verse 1: 8, “Unless thou know thyself, O fair one among women,”72 Origen explains that the soul must examine its feelings and actions. Does it have the good as a goal? Does it seek after the various virtues? Is it making progress? For instance, has it completely suppressed the passions of anger, sadness, fear, and love of glory? What is its manner of giving and receiving, or of judging the truth?

This series of questions, devoid as it is of any exclusively Christian feature, takes its place in the philosophical tradition of the examination of conscience, as it had been recommended by the Pythagoreans, the Epicureans, the Stoics — especially Seneca and Epictetus — and many other philosophers, such as Plutarch and Galen.73 We find the practice recommended again by John Chrysostom,74 and especially by Dorotheus of Gaza:

We ought not only to examine ourselves every day but also every season, every month, and every week, and ask ourselves: “What stage am I at now with regards to the passion by which I was overcome last week?”
Similarly every year: "Last year I was overcome by such and such a passion; how about now?"

The Fathers have told us how useful it is for each of us to purify himself in turn, by examining, every evening, how we have spent the day, and every morning, how we have spent the night. Truly, however, we who sin so much and are so forgetful, really need to examine ourselves every six hours also, so that we may know how we have spent these hours and in what way we have sinned.²⁵

In this regard there is an interesting detail in Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*. According to his biographer, Antony used to recommend to his disciples that they take written notes of the actions and movements of their souls. It is possible that written examinations of conscience were already part of the philosophical tradition;²⁶ they would have been useful, if not necessary, in order to ensure that the investigation was as precise as possible. For Antony, however, the important aspect was the therapeutic value of writing: “Let each one of us note and record our actions and the stirrings of our souls as though we were going to give an account of them to each other.”²⁷ Surely, he continues, we would not dare to commit sins in public, in full view of others: “Let this record replace the eyes of our fellow ascetics.” According to Antony, the act of writing gives us the impression of being in public, in front of an audience. We can also discern the therapeutic value of writing in a passage in which Dorotheus of Gaza reports that he felt “help and relief”²⁸ by the mere fact of having written to his spiritual director.

Another interesting psychological point: Plato and Zeno had remarked that the quality of our dreams allows us to judge the spiritual state of our soul.²⁹ We find this observation repeated by Evagrius Ponticus³⁰ and Diadochus of Photice.³¹

Finally, *prosoche* implies self-mastery. That is, it implies the triumph of reason over the passions, since it is the passions that cause the distraction, dispersion, and dissipation of the soul. Monastic literature insists tirelessly on the misdeeds of the passions, which were often personified in demoniacal form.

Many recollections of ancient philosophy were preserved in monastic exercises of self-mastery. For instance, we find Dorotheus of Gaza, like Epictetus, advising his disciples to begin by training themselves in little things, so as to create a habit,³² before moving on to greater things. Similarly, he advises them to diminish the number of their sins bit by bit, in order to defeat a passion.³³ We find Evagrius Ponticus proposing that one passion ought to be combated by means of another – fornication, for instance, by the concern for one’s good reputation – as long as it remains impossible to combat the passion directly by the virtue which is opposed to it. This was the method already suggested by Cicero in his *Tusculan Disputations*.³⁴
We said above that Christianity’s acceptance of spiritual exercises had introduced into it a certain spiritual attitude and style of life which it had previously lacked. As an example, let us consider the concept of exercises as a whole. In the very process of performing repetitious actions and undergoing a training in order to modify and transform ourselves, there is a certain reflectivity and distance which is very different from evangelical spontaneity. Attention to oneself – the essence of prosoche – gives rise to a whole series of techniques of introspection. It engenders an extraordinary finesse in the examination of conscience and spiritual discernment. Most significantly, the ideal sought after in these exercises, and the goals proposed for the spiritual life, became tinged with a strong Stoico-Platonic coloration; that is to say, since by the end of antiquity Neoplatonism had integrated Stoic ethics within itself, that they were deeply infused with Neoplatonism. This is the case, for instance, in Dorotheus of Gaza, who describes spiritual perfection in completely Stoic terms: it is the transformation of the will so that it becomes identified with the Divine Will:

He who has no will of his own always does what he wishes. For since he has no will of his own, everything that happens satisfies him. He finds himself doing as he wills all the time, for he does not want things to be as he wills them, but he wills that they be just as they are.85

The most recent editors of Dorotheus compare this text with a passage from the Manual of Epictetus: “Do not seek to have everything that happens happen as you wish, but wish for everything to happen as it actually does happen, and your life will be serene.”86

Spiritual perfection is also depicted as apatheia – the complete absence of passions – a Stoic concept taken up by Neoplatonism. For Dorotheus of Gaza, apatheia is the end-result of the annihilation of one’s own will: “From this cutting off of self-will a man procures for himself detachment [apropatheia], and from detachment he comes, with the help of God, to perfect apatheia.”87 We may note in passing that the means Dorotheus recommends for cutting off self-will are wholly identical to the exercises of self-mastery of the philosophical tradition. In order to cure curiosity, for instance, Plutarch advised people not to read funeral epitaphs, not to snoop on their neighbors, and to turn their backs on street scenes.88 Similarly, Dorotheus advises us not to look in the direction where we want to look; not to ask the cook what he’s preparing for dinner; and not to join in a conversation we find already underway.89 This is what Dorotheus means by “cutting off self-will.”

It is with Evagrius, however, that we can see most clearly just how closely Christian apatheia can be linked to philosophical concepts. In Evagrius’ Praktikos, we find the following definition: “The Kingdom of Heaven is apatheia of the soul along with true knowledge of existing things.”90 When
we turn to comment on a formula such as this, we find how great is the
distance separating such speculations from the evangelical spirit. As we know,
the evangelical message consisted in the announcement of an eschatological
event called “the Kingdom of Heaven” or “the Kingdom of God.” Evagrius
begins by differentiating between the two expressions, and interpreting them
in a highly personal way. Enlarging upon the Origenist tradition, he
considers that the two expressions designate two inner states of the soul. More
precisely, they designate two stages of spiritual progress:

The Kingdom of Heaven is *apatheia* of the soul along with true
knowledge of existing things.

The Kingdom of God is knowledge of the Holy Trinity co-extensive
with the capacity of the intelligence and giving it a surpassing incorrupt-
tibility.

Two levels of knowledge are distinguished here: the knowledge of beings and
the knowledge of God. We then realize that this distinction corresponds
exactly to a division of the parts of philosophy which was well known to
Origen, and is attested in Platonism at least since the time of Plutarch. In
this division, three separate stages or levels of spiritual progress are distin-
guished, which correspond to the three parts of philosophy: ethics – or
“practike,” as Evagrius calls it – physics, and theology. Ethics corresponds to
initial purification, physics to definitive detachment from the sensible world
and contemplation of the order of nature; finally, theology corresponds to
contemplation of the principle of all things. According to the Evagrian
schema, however, ethics corresponds to *praktike*, physics to “the Kingdom of
Heaven,” which includes the true knowledge of beings, and theology corre-
sponds to “the Kingdom of God,” which is the knowledge of the Trinity. In
Neoplatonic systematization, these degrees also correspond to degrees of
virtue. According to Porphyry, the soul begins by utilizing the *political*
virtues to dominate the passions via the state of *metriopatheia*. It then rises to
the level of the *kathartic* virtues. These virtues begin to detach the soul from
the body, but do not yet do so completely; this is only the beginning of
*apatheia*. Not until the level of the *theoretical* virtues does the soul attain to
full *apatheia* and perfect separation from the body. It is at this level that the
soul is able to contemplate the forms within the divine intellect, which are the
models for the phenomenal world. This level, characterized by *apatheia*
and the contemplation of existents, corresponds to Evagrius’ “Kingdom
of Heaven.” According to Evagrius, the soul now contemplates the
multiplicity of *physseis* (“natures”; hence the denomination “physical”): on the
one hand, the intelligible forms, and on the other the logos of sensible
beings. The final stage, noetic in nature, is the contemplation of God
Himself. Thus, Evagrius sums up his thought in these terms: “Christianity is
the doctrine of Christ our Savior. It is composed of *praktike*, of physics, and of theology."  

*Apathetia* plays an essential role, not only in theoretical constructions such as Evagrian metaphysics, but also in monastic spirituality. There, its value is closely linked to that of peace of mind and absence of worry: *anemimia* or *tranquillitas*. Dorotheus of Gaza does not hesitate to declare that peace of mind is so important that one must, if necessary, drop what one has undertaken if one's peace of mind is endangered. Peace of mind – *tranquillitas animi* – had, moreover, always been a central value within the philosophical tradition.

For Porphyry, as we have seen, *apatheia* was a result of the soul's detachment from the body. Here we touch once again upon the philosophical exercise *par excellence*. As we saw above, Plato had declared: "those who go about philosophizing correctly are in training for death." As late as the seventh century, we still find the echo of this saying in Maximus Confessor: "In conformity with the philosophy of Christ, let us make of our life a training for death."

Yet Maximus himself is only the inheritor of a rich tradition, which repeatedly identified Christian philosophy with training for death. We encounter this theme already in Clement of Alexandria, who understood such training in a thoroughly Platonic sense, as the attempt spiritually to separate the soul from the body. For Clement, perfect knowledge, or *gnosis*, is a kind of death. It separates the soul from the body, and promotes the soul to a life entirely devoted to the good, allowing it to devote itself to the contemplation of genuine realities with a purified mind. Again, the same motif recurs in Gregory Nazianzen: "Make of this life, as Plato said, a training for death, while – to speak in his terms – separating the soul from the body as far as possible." "This," he tells us, "is the practice of philosophy." Evagrius, for his part, expresses himself in terms strikingly similar to Porphyry's:

To separate the body from the soul is the privilege only of Him who has joined them together. But to separate the soul from the body lies as well in the power of the person who pursues virtue. For our Fathers gave to the training for death and to the flight from the body a special name: *anachoresis* [i.e. the monastic life].

It is easy to see that the Platonic concept of the flight from the body, which exercised such an attraction upon the young Augustine, was an element *added on* to Christianity, and not essential to it. Nevertheless, this concept determined the orientation of the whole of Christian spirituality in a quite specific direction.

So far, we have noted the permanent survival of certain philosophical spiritual exercises in Christianity and monasticism, and we have tried to make
comprehensible the particular tonality that their reception introduced into Christianity. We must not, however, exaggerate the importance of this phenomenon. In the first place, as we have said, it manifested itself only in a rather restricted circle: among Christian writers who had received a philosophical education. Even in their case, however, the final synthesis is essentially Christian.

To be sure, our authors strove to Christianize their borrowings as much as possible; but this is perhaps the least important aspect of the matter. They believed they recognized spiritual exercises, which they had learned through philosophy, in specific scriptural passages. Thus, we saw Basil of Caesarea making a connection between prosoche and a text from Deuteronomy. Then, in Athanasius’ Life of Antony, and throughout monastic literature, prosoche was transformed into the “watch of the heart,” under the influence of Proverbs, 4:23: “Above all else, guard your heart.” Examination of one’s conscience was often justified by the Second Letter to the Corinthians, 13:5: “Examine yourselves ... and test yourselves.” Finally, the meditation on death was recommended on the basis of First Corinthians, 15: 31: “I die every day.”

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to believe that these references were enough, all by themselves, to Christianize spiritual exercises. The reason why Christian authors paid attention to these particular biblical passages was that they were already familiar, from other sources, with the spiritual exercises of prosoche, meditation on death, and examination of the conscience. By themselves, the texts from scripture could never have supplied a method for practicing these exercises. Often, in fact, a given scriptural passage has only a distant connection with a particular spiritual exercise.

More important is the overall spirit in which Christian and monastic spiritual exercises were practiced. They always presupposed the assistance of God’s grace, and they made of humility the most important of virtues. In the words of Dorotheus of Gaza: “The closer one comes to God, the more one sees oneself as a sinner.” Such humility makes us consider ourselves inferior to others. It leads us to maintain the greatest reserve in both conduct and speech, and to adopt certain significant bodily positions, for instance prostration before other monks.

Two other fundamental virtues were penitence and obedience. Penitence, inspired by the fear and love of God, could take the form of extremely severe self-mortification. The remembrance of death was intended not only to make people realize the urgency of conversion, but also to develop the fear of God. In turn, it is linked to meditation on the Last Judgment, and thereby to the virtue of penitence. The same holds true of the examination of conscience.

Obedience – the renunciation of one’s own will, in complete submission to the orders of a superior – completely transformed the philosophical practice of spiritual direction. We can see to just what extremes such obedience could
be taken in Dorotheus' *Life of Dositheus*. The director of conscience had an absolute power of decision over his disciple's possessions, eating habits, and entire way of life.

In the final analysis, all these virtues were transfigured by the transcendent dimension of the love of God and of Christ. Thus, to train for death, or to separate the soul from the body, was at the same time to participate in the death of Christ. To renounce one's will was to adhere to divine love.

Generally speaking, we can say that monasticism in Egypt and Syria was born and developed in a Christian milieu, spontaneously and without the intervention of a philosophical model. The first monks were not cultivated men, but Christians who wanted to attain to Christian perfection by the heroic practice of the evangelical prescriptions, and the imitation of the *Life* of Christ. It was, therefore, natural that they should seek their techniques of perfection in the Old and the New Testament. Under Alexandrian influence, however — the distant influence of Philo, and the more immediate influence of Origen and Clement of Alexandria, magnificently orchestrated by the Cappadocians — certain philosophical spiritual techniques were introduced into Christian spirituality. The result of this was that the Christian ideal was described, and, in part, practiced, by borrowing models and vocabulary from the Greek philosophical tradition. Thanks to its literary and philosophical qualities, this tendency became dominant, and it was through its agency that the heritage of ancient spiritual exercises was transmitted to Christian spirituality: first to that of the Middle Ages, and subsequently to that of modern times.

NOTES

1 See above.
2 See above.
5 Ibid, p. 18.
6 Ibid.
7 See above.
10 See above.

12 Justin, Dialogue with Trypho, 8, 1; Tatian, Address to the Greeks, 31, 35, 55; Melito in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 4, 26, 7.

13 Justin, Second Apology, 2, 13, 3; Iactantius, Divine Institutes, 7, 7, 7: “if someone had arisen who could collect the truth scattered and dispersed among the individual philosophers and sects and reduce it to one body, that one . . . would not disagree with us”; 7, 8, 3: “We . . . are able to pick out the truth by surer signs; we who gather it, not from fluctuating suspicion, but who know it from divine tradition.”

14 Justin, Apology, I, 46, 1–4.


16 Ibid, I, 11, 52, 3.

17 Most of the relevant texts have been assembled in A.N. Malingrey, “Philosophia.” Étude d’un groupe de mots dans la littérature grecque, des Présocratiques au IVe siècle ap. J.-C., Paris 1961.

18 Philo Judaeus, The Legation to Gaius, 156; Life of Moses, 2, 216; On the Contemplative Life, 26.

19 Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 18, 11; 23.

20 Gregory Nazianzen, Apologetica, 103, PG 35, 504A.

21 John Chrysostom, Against the Opponents of the Monastic Life, 3, 13, PG 47, col. 372.

22 See below.

23 Theodoret of Cyrillus, History of the Monks of Syria, 2, 3, 1; 4, 1, 9; 4, 2, 19; 4, 10, 15; 6, 13, 1; 8, 2, 3 Canivet.

24 Philo Judaeus, On the Contemplative Life, 2; 30.


26 Exordium Magnum Cisterciense, PL 185, 437.

27 John of Salisbury, Polycraticus, 7, 21, PL 199, 696.

28 Leclercq “Pour l’histoire,” p. 221.

29 See above.

30 Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, 2, 20, 120, 1.


32 Deuteronomy, 15: 9. [The Septuagint Greek version of the Bible renders this phrase as proseche seautoi me genetai rhema krypton en tei kardiai sou: “Pay attention to yourself, lest a hidden word come to be in your heart,” which the King James Version renders as “Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart.” The Greek title of Basil’s sermon is consequently eis to Proseche seautou: “On the words, ‘Give heed to yourself.’” – Trans.]
33 Basil, *In Illud Attend*e, 2, 201B, pp. 433–4 Wagner.
34 Ibid, 3, 204A, p. 435 Wagner. This distinction was current in Platonic circles; cf. Plato, *First Alcibiades*, 130–1d; *Apolo*gy, 36b4–c6.
37 On the following exercises, the reader may consult the following articles in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*: “Attention,” “Apathie,” “Contemplation,” “Examen de Conscience,” “Direction spirituelle,” “Exercices spirituels,” “Garde du coeur.”
41 See above.
43 Cf. above.
44 Ibid, 19, 872A, p. 45 Gregg/Clebsch.
45 Ibid.
51 Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 873C; Basil of Caesarea, *Regulae fusiis tractatae*, PG 31, 921 B = p. 243 Wagner. Cf. John Cassian, *Collationes*, vol. 1, p. 84 Pichery = p. 84 Luibheid: “we must practice the reading of the Scripture, together with all the other virtuous activities, and we do so to *trap and to hold our hearts* free of the harm of every dangerous passion.” [Basil and Athanasius use the term *phulake*, among whose many meanings are “protection,” “control,” “guarding,” and “observance.” It can also mean a prison or a prisoner. Originally, however, *phulake* meant a night-watch or the person charged with this duty (the Latin *custodia*); and this is the meaning I have tried to convey by translating *he tes kardias phulake* by “watch of the heart.” All the other meanings, however, are relevant and should be borne in mind. – Trans.]
52 Dorotheus of Gaza, *Didaskalai*, §104 Regnault/de Préville = p. 163 Wheeler.
53 Porphyry, *Porphyry the Philosopher, To Marcella*, 12.
55 Basil, *In Illud attend*e, p. 243 Wagner.
57 Ibid, 56, p. 117, 15.
60 On the theme of presence, see above.
See above.

Evagrius of Pontis, Praktikos, §91, p. 91 Bamberger.


Aposthagmata Patrum, PG 65, 173A–B.

Dorotheus of Gaza, Didaskaliai, §60, 27, p. 120 Wheeler.

Ibid, §69, 2, p. 131 Wheeler.

Ibid, §189, 4–5.

Ibid, §60, 30, pp. 120–1 Wheeler.

See above.


[Again, while the King James Bible reads “If thou know not, O thou fairest among women”, the Greek Septuagint version gives “Unless you know yourself” (Ean me gnoi seauten) – Trans.]


John Chrysostom, Non esse ad gratiam concionandum, PG 50, 659–60.

Dorotheus of Gaza, Didaskaliai, §§111, 13; 117, 7, pp. 170; 175 Wheeler.

Cf. I. Hadot, Seneca, p. 70.

Athanasius, Life of Antony, PG 26, 924B, p. 73 Gregg/Clebsch.

Dorotheus of Gaza, Didaskaliai, §25, 11, p. 91 Wheeler.

See above.


Diadochus of Photice, Kephalaia Gnostica, 37, p. 106 Des Places.

Dorotheus of Gaza, Didaskaliai, §20, p. 89 Wheeler. L. Regnault and J. de Préville, editors of the Sources Chrétiennes edition, cite as a parallel Epictetus, Discourses, 1, 18, 18.


Dorotheus of Gaza, Didaskaliai, §202, 12.

Epictetus, Manual, 8.

Dorotheus of Gaza, Didaskaliai, §20, 11–13, p. 88 Wheeler.

Plutarch, On Curiosity, 520Dff.

Dorotheus of Gaza, Didaskaliai, 20, pp. 88–9 Wheeler.

Evagrius of Pontis, Praktikos, 2, p. 15 Bamberger.

See the texts cited by A. and C. Guillaumont in the notes to their commentary on the Praktikos (SC 171), p. 499, n. 2; p. 501, n. 3.

Evagrius of Pontis, Praktikos, §§2–3, pp. 15–16 Bamberger.

95 Porphyry, *Sentences*, p. 27, 9, Lamberz.
97 Evagrius of Pontis, *Praktikos*, §1, p. 15 Bamberger.
101 In the treatises of Plutarch and Seneca, for instance.
102 See above.
106 Evagrius of Pontis, *Praktikos*, §52, p. 30 Bamberger. Compare Porphyry, *Sentences*, 8, p. 3, 6 Lamberz: “What nature has bound together, she also unbinds, but that which the soul binds, the soul likewise unbinds. It was nature that bound the body within the soul, but it was the soul which bound itself within the body. Therefore, while it is nature that unbinds the body from the soul, it is the soul which unbinds itself from the body.”
107 Cf. above.
110 Ibid, 872A, p. 45 Gregg/Clebsch.
111 Dorotheus of Gaza, *Didaskaliai*, §151, 47.
Every person — whether Greek or Barbarian — who is in training for wisdom, leading a blameless, irreproachable life, chooses neither to commit injustice nor return it unto others, but to avoid the company of busybodies, and hold in contempt the places where they spend their time — courts, councils, marketplaces, assemblies — in short, every kind of meeting or reunion of thoughtless people. As their goal is a life of peace and serenity, they contemplate nature and everything found within her: they attentively explore the earth, the sea, the air, the sky, and every nature found therein. In thought, they accompany the moon, the sun, and the rotations of the other stars, whether fixed or wandering. Their bodies remain on earth, but they give wings to their souls, so that, rising into the ether, they may observe the powers which dwell there, as is fitting for those who have truly become citizens of the world. Such people consider the whole world as their city, and its citizens are the companions of wisdom; they have received their civic rights from virtue, which has been entrusted with presiding over the universal commonwealth. Thus, filled with every excellence, they are accustomed no longer to take account of physical discomforts or exterior evils, and they train themselves to be indifferent to indifferent things; they are armed against both pleasures and desires, and, in short, they always strive to keep themselves above passions ... they do not give in under the blows of fate, because they have calculated its attacks in advance (for foresight makes easier to bear even the most difficult of the things that happen against our will; since then the mind no longer supposes what happens to be strange and novel, but its perception of them is dulled, as if it had to do with old and worn-out things). It is obvious that people such as these, who find their joy in virtue, celebrate a festival their whole life long. To be sure, there is only a small number of such people; they are like embers of wisdom kept smouldering in our cities, so that virtue may not be altogether snuffed out and disappear from our race. But if only
people everywhere felt the same way as this small number, and became as nature meant for them to be: blameless, irreproachable, and lovers of wisdom, rejoicing in the beautiful just because it is beautiful, and considering that there is no other good besides it . . . then our cities would be brimful of happiness. They would know nothing of the things that cause grief and fear, but would be so filled with the causes of joy and well-being that there would be no single moment in which they would not lead a life full of joyful laughter; indeed, the whole cycle of the year would be a festival for them.\(^1\)

In this passage from Philo of Alexandria, inspired by Stoicism, one of the fundamental aspects of philosophy in the Hellenistic and Roman eras comes clearly to the forefront. During this period, philosophy was a way of life. This is not only to say that it was a specific type of moral conduct; we can easily see the role played in the passage from Philo by the contemplation of nature. Rather, it means that philosophy was a mode of existing-in-the-world, which had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual’s life.

For the ancients, the mere word *philosophia* — the love of wisdom — was enough to express this conception of philosophy. In the *Symposium*, Plato had shown that Socrates, symbol of the philosopher, could be identified with Eros, the son of Poros (expedient) and of Penia (poverty). Eros lacked wisdom, but he did know how to acquire it.\(^2\) Philosophy thus took on the form of an exercise of the thought, will, and the totality of one’s being, the goal of which was to achieve a state practically inaccessible to mankind: wisdom. Philosophy was a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual’s way of being.

Thus, philosophy was a way of life, both in its exercise and effort to achieve wisdom, and in its goal, wisdom itself. For real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us “be” in a different way. Both the grandeur and the paradox of ancient philosophy are that it was, at one and the same time, conscious of the fact that wisdom is inaccessible, and convinced of the necessity of pursuing spiritual progress. In the words of Quintillian: “We must . . . strive after that which is highest, as many of the ancients did. Even though they believed that no sage had ever yet been found, they nevertheless continued to teach the precepts of wisdom.”\(^3\) The ancients knew that they would never be able to realize wisdom within themselves as a stable, definitive state, but they at least hoped to accede to it in certain privileged moments, and wisdom was the transcendent norm which guided their action.

Wisdom, then, was a way of life which brought peace of mind (*ataraxia*), inner freedom (*autarkeia*), and a cosmic consciousness. First and foremost, philosophy presented itself as a therapeutic, intended to cure mankind’s
anguish. This concept is stated explicitly in Xenocrates,⁴ and in Epicurus:⁵ “We must not suppose that any other object is to be gained from the knowledge of the phenomena of the sky... than peace of mind and a sure confidence.” This was also a prominent idea for the Stoics⁶ and for the Skeptics, apropos of whom Sextus Empiricus⁷ utilizes the following splendid image:

Apelles, the famous painter, wished to reproduce the foam from a horse’s mouth in a painting. He was not able to get it right, and decided to give up. So, he threw the sponge he used to wipe his brushes against the painting. When the sponge hit the painting, it produced nothing other than an imitation of a horse’s foam. In the same way, the Skeptics start off like the other philosophers, seeking peace of mind in firmness and confidence in their judgments. When they do not achieve it, they suspend their judgment. No sooner do they do this than, by pure chance, peace of mind accompanies the suspension of judgment, like a shadow follows a body.

Philosophy presented itself as a method for achieving independence and inner freedom (autarkeia), that state in which the ego depends only upon itself. We encounter this theme in Socrates,⁸ among the Cynics, in Aristotle – for whom only the contemplative life is independent⁹ – in Epicurus,¹⁰ and among the Stoics.¹¹ Although their methodologies differ, we find in all philosophical schools the same awareness of the power of the human self to free itself from everything which is alien to it, even if, as in the case of the Skeptics, it does so via the mere refusal to make any decision.

In Epicureanism and in Stoicism, cosmic consciousness was added to these fundamental dispositions. By “cosmic consciousness,” we mean the consciousness that we are a part of the cosmos, and the consequent dilation of our self throughout the infinity of universal nature. In the words of Epicurus’ disciple Metrodorus: “Remember that, although you are mortal and have only a limited life-span, yet you have risen, through the contemplation of nature, to the infinity of space and time, and you have seen all the past and all the future.”¹² According to Marcus Aurelius: “The rational soul... travels through the whole universe and the void that surrounds it... it reaches out into the boundless extent of infinity, and it examines and contemplates the periodic rebirth of all things.”¹³ At each instant, the ancient sage was conscious of living in the cosmos, and he placed himself in harmony with the cosmos.

In order better to understand in what way ancient philosophy could be a way of life, it is perhaps necessary to have recourse to the distinction proposed by the Stoics,¹⁴ between discourse about philosophy and philosophy itself. For the Stoics, the parts of philosophy – physics, ethics, and logic – were not, in
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...et, parts of philosophy itself, but rather parts of philosophical discourse. By this they meant that when it comes to teaching philosophy, it is necessary to set forth a theory of logic, a theory of physics, and a theory of ethics. The exigencies of discourse, both logical and pedagogical, require that these distinctions be made. But philosophy itself — that is, the philosophical way of life — is no longer a theory divided into parts, but a unitary act, which consists in living logic, physics, and ethics. In this case, we no longer study logical theory — that is, the theory of speaking and thinking well — we simply think and speak well. We no longer engage in theory about the physical world, but we contemplate the cosmos. We no longer theorize about moral action, but we act in a correct and just way.

Discourse about philosophy is not the same thing as philosophy. Polemon, one of the heads of the Old Academy, used to say:

we should exercise ourselves with realities, not with dialectical speculations, like a man who has devoured some textbook on harmonics, but has never put his knowledge into practice. Likewise, we must not be like those who can astonish their onlookers by their skill in syllogistic argumentation, but who, when it comes to their own lives, contradict their own teachings.  

Five centuries later, Epictetus echoed this view:

A carpenter does not come up to you and say, “Listen to me discourse about the art of carpentry,” but he makes a contract for a house and builds it . . . Do the same thing yourself. Eat like a man, drink like a man . . . get married, have children, take part in civic life, learn how to put up with insults, and tolerate other people.  

We can immediately foresee the consequences of this distinction, formulated by the Stoics but admitted by the majority of philosophers, concerning the relationship between theory and practice. An Epicurean saying puts it clearly: “Vain is the word of that philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man.” Philosophical theories are in the service of the philosophical life. That is why, in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, they were reduced to a theoretical, systematic, highly concentrated nucleus, capable of exercising a strong psychological effect, and easy enough to handle so that it might always be kept close at hand (procheiron). Philosophical discourse was not systematic because it wanted to provide a total, systematic explanation of the whole of reality. Rather, it was systematic in order that it might provide the mind with a small number of principles, tightly linked together, which derived greater persuasive force and mnemonic effectiveness precisely from such systematization. Short sayings summed up, sometimes in striking form,
the essential dogmas, so that the student might easily relocate himself within the fundamental disposition in which he was to live.

Does the philosophical life, then, consist only in the application, at every moment, of well-studied theorems, in order to resolve life’s problems? As a matter of fact, when we reflect on what the philosophical life implies, we realize that there is an abyss between philosophical theory and philosophizing as living action. To take a similar case: it may seem as though artists, in their creative activity, do nothing but apply rules, yet there is an immeasurable distance between artistic creation and the abstract theory of art. In philosophy, however, we are not dealing with the mere creation of a work of art: the goal is rather to transform ourselves. The act of living in a genuinely philosophical way thus corresponds to an order of reality totally different from that of philosophical discourse.

In Stoicism, as in Epicureanism, philosophizing was a continuous act, permanent and identical with life itself, which had to be renewed at each instant. For both schools, this act could be defined as an orientation of the attention.

In Stoicism, attention was oriented toward the purity of one’s intentions. In other words, its objective was the conformity of our individual will with reason, or the will of universal nature. In Epicureanism, by contrast, attention was oriented toward pleasure, which is, in the last analysis, the pleasure of existing. In order to realize this state of attention, however, a number of exercises were necessary: intense meditation on fundamental dogmas, the ever-renewed awareness of the finitude of life, examination of one’s conscience, and, above all, a specific attitude toward time.

Both the Stoics and the Epicureans advised us to live in the present, letting ourselves be neither troubled by the past, nor worried by the uncertainty of the future. For both these schools of thought, the present sufficed for happiness, because it was the only reality which belongs to us and depends on us. Stoics and Epicureans agreed in recognizing the infinite value of each instant: for them, wisdom is just as perfect and complete in one instant as it is throughout an eternity. In particular, for the Stoic sage, the totality of the cosmos is contained and implied in each instant. Moreover, we not only can but we must be happy right now. The matter is urgent, for the future is uncertain and death is a constant threat: “While we’re waiting to live, life passes us by.” Such an attitude can only be understood if we assume that there was, in ancient philosophy, a sharp awareness of the infinite, incommensurable value of existence. Existing within the cosmos, in the unique reality of the cosmic event, was held to be infinitely precious.

Thus, as we have seen, philosophy in the Hellenistic and Greek period took on the form of a way of life, an art of living, and a way of being. This, however, was nothing new; ancient philosophy had had this character at least
as far back as Socrates. There was a Socratic style of life (which the Cynics were to imitate), and the Socratic dialogue was an exercise which brought Socrates' interlocutor to put himself in question, to take care of himself, and to make his soul as beautiful and wise as possible. Similarly, Plato defined philosophy as a training for death, and the philosopher as the person who does not fear death, because he contemplates the totality of time and of being.

It is sometimes claimed that Aristotle was a pure theoretician, but for him, too, philosophy was incapable of being reduced to philosophical discourse, or to a body of knowledge. Rather, philosophy for Aristotle was a quality of the mind, the result of an inner transformation. The form of life preached by Aristotle was the life according to the mind.

We must not, therefore, as is done all too often, imagine that philosophy was completely transformed during the Hellenistic period, whether after the Macedonian domination over the Greek cities, or during the imperial period. On the one hand, it is not the case, as tenacious, widely-held clichés would have us believe, that the Greek city-state died after 330 BC, and political life along with it. Above all, the conception of philosophy as an art and form of living is not linked to political circumstances, or to a need for escape mechanisms and inner liberty, in order to compensate for lost political freedom. Already for Socrates and his disciples, philosophy was a mode of life, and a technique of inner living. Philosophy did not change its essence throughout the entire course of its history in antiquity.

In general, historians of philosophy pay little attention to the fact that ancient philosophy was, first and foremost, a way of life. They consider philosophy as, above all, philosophical discourse. How can the origins of this prejudice be explained? I believe it is linked to the evolution of philosophy itself in the Middle Ages and in modern times.

Christianity played a considerable role in this phenomenon. From its very beginnings — that is, from the second century AD on — Christianity had presented itself as a philosophy: the Christian way of life. Indeed, the very fact that Christianity was able to present itself as a philosophy confirms the assertion that philosophy was conceived in antiquity as a way of life. If to do philosophy was to live in conformity with the law of reason, so the argument went, the Christian was a philosopher, since he lived in conformity with the law of the Logos — divine reason. In order to present itself as a philosophy, Christianity was obliged to integrate elements borrowed from ancient philosophy. It had to make the Logos of the gospel according to John coincide with Stoic cosmic reason, and subsequently also with the Aristotelian or Platonic intellect. It also had to integrate philosophical spiritual exercises into Christian life. The phenomenon of integration appears very clearly in Clement of Alexandria, and was intensely developed in the monastic movement, where we find the Stoico/Platonic exercises of attention to oneself (prosoche),
meditation, examination of conscience, and the training for death. We also re-encounter the high value accorded to peace of mind and impasibility.

The Middle Ages was to inherit the conception of monastic life as Christian philosophy, that is, as a Christian way of life. As Dom Jean Leclerq has written: “As much as in antiquity, philosophia in the monastic Middle Ages designates not a theory or a way of knowing, but a lived wisdom, a way of living according to reason.” At the same time, however, the medieval universities witnessed the elimination of the confusion which had existed in primitive Christianity between theology, founded on the rule of faith, and traditional philosophy, founded on reason. Philosophy was now no longer the supreme science, but the “servant of theology,” it supplied the latter with the conceptual, logical, physical, and metaphysical materials it needed. The Faculty of Arts became no more than a preparation for the Faculty of Theology.

If we disregard, for the moment, the monastic usage of the word philosophia, we can say that philosophy in the Middle Ages had become a purely theoretical and abstract activity. It was no longer a way of life. Ancient spiritual exercises were no longer a part of philosophy, but found themselves integrated into Christian spirituality. It is in this form that we encounter them once again in the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius. Neoplatonic mysticism was prolonged into Christian mysticism, especially among such Rhineland Dominicans as Meister Eckhardt.

Thus, the Middle Ages saw a radical change in the content of philosophy as compared to antiquity. Moreover, from the medieval period on, theology and philosophy were taught in those universities which had been creations of the medieval church. Even though attempts have been made to use the word “university” in reference to ancient educational institutions, it appears that neither the notion nor the reality of the university ever existed during antiquity, with the possible exception of the Orient near the end of the late antique period.

One of the characteristics of the university is that it is made up of professors who train professors, or professionals training professionals. Education was thus no longer directed toward people who were to be educated with a view to becoming fully developed human beings, but to specialists, in order that they might learn how to train other specialists. This is the danger of “Scholasticism,” that philosophical tendency which began to be sketched at the end of antiquity, developed in the Middle Ages, and whose presence is still recognizable in philosophy today.

The scholastic university, dominated by theology, would continue to function up to the end of the eighteenth century, but from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, genuinely creative philosophical activity would develop outside the university, in the persons of Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz. Philosophy thus reconquered its autonomy vis-à-vis
theology, but this movement – born as a reaction against medieval Scholasticism – was situated on the same terrain as the latter. In opposition to one kind of theoretical philosophical discourse, there arose yet another theoretical discourse.

From the end of the eighteenth century onward, a new philosophy made its appearance within the university, in the persons of Wolff, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. From now on, with a few rare exceptions like Schopenhauer or Nietzsche, philosophy would be indissolubly linked to the university. We see this in the case of Bergson, Husserl, and Heidegger. This fact is not without importance. Philosophy – reduced, as we have seen, to philosophical discourse – develops from this point on in a different atmosphere and environment from that of ancient philosophy. In modern university philosophy, philosophy is obviously no longer a way of life or form of life – unless it be the form of life of a professor of philosophy. Nowadays, philosophy’s element and vital milieu is the state educational institution; this has always been, and may still be, a danger for its independence. In the words of Schopenhauer:

Generally speaking, university philosophy is mere fencing in front of a mirror. In the last analysis, its goal is to give students opinions which are to the liking of the minister who hands out the Chairs. . . . As a result, this state-financed philosophy makes a joke of philosophy. And yet, if there is one thing desirable in this world, it is to see a ray of light fall onto the darkness of our lives, shedding some kind of light on the mysterious enigma of our existence.27

Be this as it may, modern philosophy is first and foremost a discourse developed in the classroom, and then consigned to books. It is a text which requires exegesis.

This is not to say that modern philosophy has not rediscovered, by different paths, some of the existential aspects of ancient philosophy. Besides, it must be added that these aspects have never completely disappeared. For example, it was no accident that Descartes entitled one of his works Meditations. They are indeed meditations – meditatio in the sense of exercise – according to the spirit of the Christian philosophy of St Augustine, and Descartes recommends that they be practiced over a certain period of time. Beneath its systematic, geometrical form, Spinoza’s Ethics corresponds rather well to what systematic philosophical discourse could mean for the Stoics. One could say that Spinoza’s discourse, nourished on ancient philosophy, teaches man how to transform, radically and concretely, his own being, and how to accede to beatitude. The figure of the sage, moreover, appears in the final lines of the Ethics: “the sage, in so far as he is regarded as such, is scarcely at all disturbed in spirit, but, being conscious of himself, and of God, and of things, by a
certain eternal necessity, never ceases to be, but always possesses true acquiescence of the spirit.” The philosophies of Nietzsche and of Schopenhauer are also invitations to radically transform our way of life. Both men were, moreover, thinkers steeped in the tradition of ancient philosophy.

According to the Hegelian model, human consciousness has a purely historical character; and the only lasting thing is the action of the spirit itself, as it constantly engenders new forms. Under the influence of Hegel’s method, the idea arose among Marx and the young Hegelians that theory cannot be detached from practice, and that it is man’s action upon the world which gives rise to his representations. In the twentieth century, the philosophy of Bergson and the phenomenology of Husserl appeared less as systems than as methods for transforming our perception of the world. Finally, the movement of thought inaugurated by Heidegger and carried on by existentialism seeks — in theory and in principle — to engage man’s freedom and action in the philosophical process, although, in the last analysis, it too is primarily a philosophical discourse.

One could say that what differentiates ancient from modern philosophy is the fact that, in ancient philosophy, it was not only Chrysippus or Epicurus who, just because they had developed a philosophical discourse, were considered philosophers. Rather, every person who lived according to the precepts of Chrysippus or Epicurus was every bit as much of a philosopher as they. A politician like Cato of Utica was considered a philosopher and even a sage, even though he wrote and taught nothing, because his life was perfectly Stoic. The same was true of Roman statesmen like Rutilius Rufus and Quintus Mucius Scaevola Pontifex, who practiced Stoicism by showing an exemplary disinterestedness and humanity in the administration of the provinces entrusted to them. These men were not merely examples of morality, but men who lived the totality of Stoicism, speaking like Stoics (Cicero tells us explicitly that they refused to use a certain type of rhetoric in the trials in which they testified), and looking at the world like Stoics; in other words, trying to live in accord with cosmic reason. They sought to realize the ideal of Stoic wisdom: a certain way of being human, of living according to reason, within the cosmos and along with other human beings. What constituted the object of their efforts was not merely ethics, but the human being as a whole.

Ancient philosophy proposed to mankind an art of living. By contrast, modern philosophy appears above all as the construction of a technical jargon reserved for specialists.

Everyone is free to define philosophy as he likes, to choose whatever philosophy he wishes, or to invent — if he can — whatever philosophy he may think valid. Descartes and Spinoza still remained faithful to the ancient definition: for them, philosophy was “the practice of wisdom.” If, following their example, we believe that it is essential for mankind to try to accede to
the state of wisdom, we shall find in the ancient traditions of the various philosophical schools – Socratism, Platonism, Aristotelianism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, Cynicism, Skepticism – models of life, fundamental forms in accordance with which reason may be applied to human existence, and archetypes of the quest for wisdom. It is precisely this plurality of ancient schools that is precious. It allows us to compare the consequences of all the various possible fundamental attitudes of reason, and offers a privileged field for experimentation. This, of course, presupposes that we reduce these philosophies to their spirit and essence, detaching them from their outmoded cosmological or mythical elements, and disengaging from them the fundamental propositions that they themselves considered essential. This is not, by the way, a matter of choosing one or the other of these traditions to the exclusion of the others. Epicureanism and Stoicism, for example, correspond to two opposite but inseparable poles of our inner life: the demands of our moral conscience, and the flourishing of our joy in existing.31

Philosophy in antiquity was an exercise practiced at each instant. It invites us to concentrate on each instant of life, to become aware of the infinite value of each present moment, once we have replaced it within the perspective of the cosmos. The exercise of wisdom entails a cosmic dimension. Whereas the average person has lost touch with the world, and does not see the world qua world, but rather treats the world as a means of satisfying his desires, the sage never ceases to have the whole constantly present to mind. He thinks and acts within a cosmic perspective. He has the feeling of belonging to a whole which goes beyond the limits of his individuality. In antiquity, this cosmic consciousness was situated in a different perspective from that of the scientific knowledge of the universe that could be provided by, for instance, the science of astronomical phenomena. Scientific knowledge was objective and mathematical, whereas cosmic consciousness was the result of a spiritual exercise, which consisted in becoming aware of the place of one’s individual existence within the great current of the cosmos and the perspective of the whole, toti se inserens mundo, in the words of Seneca.32 This exercise was situated not in the absolute space of exact science, but in the lived experience of the concrete, living, and perceiving subject.

We have here to do with two radically different kinds of relationship to the world. We can understand the distinction between these two kinds by recalling the opposition pointed out by Husserl33 between the rotation of the earth, affirmed and proved scientifically, and the earth’s immobility, postulated both by our day-to-day experience and by transcendental/constitutive consciousness. For the latter, the earth is the immobile ground of our life, the reference point of our thought, or, as Merleau-Ponty put it, “the womb of our time and of our space.”34 In the same way, nature and the cosmos are, for our living perception, the infinite horizon of our lives, the enigma of our
existence which, as Lucretius said, inspires us with *horror et divina voluptas*, a shudder and a divine pleasure. As Goethe put it in admirable verses:

The best part of man is the shudder.  
However dearly the world makes him pay for this emotion,  
He is seized by amazement when he feels the Prodigious.\textsuperscript{15}

Ancient philosophical traditions can provide guidance in our relationship to ourselves, to the cosmos, and to other human beings. In the mentality of modern historians, there is no cliché more firmly anchored, and more difficult to uproot, than the idea according to which ancient philosophy was an escape mechanism, an act of falling back upon oneself. In the case of the Platonists, it was an escape into the heaven of ideas, into the refusal of politics in the case of the Epicureans, into the submission to fate in the case of the Stoics. This way of looking at things is, in fact, doubly false. In the first place, ancient philosophy was always a philosophy practiced in a group, whether in the case of the Pythagorean communities, Platonic love, Epicurean friendship, or Stoic spiritual direction. Ancient philosophy required a common effort, community of research, mutual assistance, and spiritual support. Above all, philosophers – even, in the last analysis, the Epicureans – never gave up having an effect on their cities, transforming society, and serving their citizens, who frequently accorded them praise, the vestiges of which are preserved for us by inscriptions. Political ideas may have differed from school to school, but the concern for having an effect on city or state, king or emperor, always remained constant. This is particularly true of Stoicism, and can easily be seen in many of the texts of Marcus Aurelius. Of the three tasks which must be kept in mind at each instant, alongside vigilance over one’s thoughts and consent to the events imposed by destiny, an essential place is accorded to the duty always to act in the service of the human community; that is, to act in accordance with justice. This last requirement is, moreover, intimately linked to the two others. It is one and the same wisdom which conforms itself to cosmic wisdom and to the reason in which human beings participate. This concern for living in the service of the human community, and for acting in accordance with justice, is an essential element of every philosophical life. In other words, the philosophical life normally entails a communitary engagement. This last is probably the hardest part to carry out. The trick is to maintain oneself on the level of reason, and not allow oneself to be blinded by political passions, anger, resentments, or prejudices. To be sure, there is an equilibrium – almost impossible to achieve – between the inner peace brought about by wisdom, and the passions to which the sight of the injustices, sufferings, and misery of mankind cannot help but give rise. Wisdom, however, consists in precisely such an equilibrium, and inner peace is indispensable for efficacious action.
Such is the lesson of ancient philosophy: an invitation to each human being to transform himself. Philosophy is a conversion, a transformation of one's way of being and living, and a quest for wisdom. This is not an easy matter. As Spinoza wrote at the end of the *Ethics*:

If the way which I have pointed out as leading to this result seems exceedingly hard, it may nevertheless be discovered. It must indeed be hard, since it is so seldom found. How would it be possible, if salvation were easy to find, and could without great labour be found, that it should be neglected by almost everybody? But all excellent things are as difficult as they are rare.36

NOTES

2 Cf. above.
4 Xenocrates, fr. 4 Heinze.
12 Cf. above.
15 Ibid, 4, 18.
16 Epictetus, *Discourses*, 3, 21, 4–6.
17 Cf. below.
18 On the concept of procheiron, see above.
23 Cf. below.
26 Cf. below.
30 René Descartes, *Principi philosophiae*, Foreword to Picot.
31 See the references from Kant, Goethe, and Jaspers cited above.