

Article

Spiritual Exercises and the Question of Religion in the Work of Pierre Hadot

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Abstract: This paper addresses John M. Cooper’s critique, and related critiques, of Pierre Hadot’s conception of philosophy as a way of life for collapsing the distinction between philosophy and religion, via the category of “spiritual exercises”. The paper has two parts. Part 1, a *pars destruens*, will show how Hadot presents three cogent rebuttals of these charges, with which he was familiar as early as the 1980s, following the publication of the first edition of his 1981 collection, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*. In part 2, a *pars construens*, putting aside the vexed category of “religion”, we will examine how Hadot reconsiders the place of the sacred in ancient philosophy, positioning the latter as not the attempt to rationally dispel any sense of the sacred in the world, but to relocate it from within the sanctioned cultic places and temples of traditional Greco-Roman religion to within the inner life of the godlike sage.

Keywords: Pierre Hadot; philosophy as a way of life; spiritual exercises; religion

1. Introduction: Posing the Question

Pierre Hadot’s work concerning ancient philosophy as a way of life is increasingly well known today, and opens up many different research vistas.¹ The concern of this essay is specifically with the question of Hadot’s conception of the place of “religion” in ancient philosophy, and the repeated criticism of his work as involving an illegitimate conflation of philosophy and religion (Sellars 2020). Read superficially, and holding contemporary metaphilosophical understandings constant, Hadot’s work can seem to effect such a collapse. At least four kinds of reasons can be presented for this claim. Firstly, Hadot argues that philosophy does not aim solely, or perhaps even primarily, at generating systematic theoretical accounts of nature, human nature, language, logic, etc. As he likes to repeat, it aims at the formation of students, not the conveyance of information. However, such formation is surely one business of the recognised world and indigenous religions: that is, exactly, the shaping of followers’ ways of life. Secondly, Hadot has talks of philosophical “conversion” to describe both the initial choice of a philosophical way of life in antiquity and, in some formulations, to describe the larger work of philosophical education. However, the term “conversion” is a word most readers today will inescapably associate with religion, and Christianity particularly, in the West. Thirdly, Hadot at times verges into describing the goal of philosophy as a transformed way of seeing the world, as against thinking about it, or the human condition: what I have called elsewhere a kind of counterfactual “phenomenology of *sagesse*” involving what he calls a *dépassement* of the ordinary, intramundane self (Sharpe 2018). The emphasis on particular kinds of experience, which harken back to Hadot’s extensive work on Neoplatonist thinkers led by Porphyry and Plotinus (Hadot 2010), can seem to some readers to evoke a kind of mysticism with unmistakable, extra-rational credentials. Fourthly and perhaps most decisively, if we ask how it is that Hadot argues that students were formed by the philosophical schools so that they came to embody specific ways of life, the answer is that the ancient philosophers practised and prescribed “spiritual exercises” to enable this existential transformation. The



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term itself, as Hadot acknowledges, comes from Ignatius Loyola, the counter-reformation Jesuit, working within a dogmatically Christian orbit. Surely, then, its application to the forms of meditation, premeditation, self-examination, contemplation, and dialogic practices Hadot means to describe as “spiritual exercises” gives the game away. What is at stake in Hadot is an illegitimate importation of a religiously shaped understanding into the work of historical metaphilosophy.

Without doubt, the already classic expression of the critique of Hadot as conflating ancient philosophy, via the spiritual exercises, with “religion” is found in John M. Cooper’s *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Cooper 2012, esp. pp. 1–22). Cooper dedicates several pages to Hadot in his introduction to this long book, to express both his debts and his hesitations about Hadot’s “fundamental” texts on philosophy as a way of life (Cooper 2012, p. 18). At issue in Cooper’s dispute with Hadot is the latter’s perceived undervaluation of the place of “living on the basis of philosophical reasoning”, and that alone, which Cooper finds in ancient philosophies—albeit with some notable hesitations about Epicurus, Epictetus, Pythagoras, the Cynics, and not least, Plotinus (Cooper 2012, p. 19). With this in view, Cooper adduces Hadot’s wonderful long essay “The End of Antiquity” (Hadot 2020e) against its author. With some qualifications, he claims that when Hadot speaks of philosophy involving “those nonrational practices that Hadot describes as “spiritual exercises”—meditation, self-exhortation, memorization, and recitation to oneself of bits of sacred text [sic]. . .”, he is only speaking accurately concerning the philosophy of the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, which Hadot describes very well in “The End of Antiquity”. This was, however, a period of decline, in which philosophy, like the religious practices of the period, was shaped by a profound cultural and spiritual malaise—“a ‘spiritual tension, an anxiety’, even a ‘nervous depression’” (Cooper 2012, p. 21)—besetting late antiquity. As Hadot explains:

This crisis is not limited to small philosophical circles. It manifests itself also among the masses. The individual becomes attentive to his salvation, here below, as well as after death. In his body and in his soul, he feels himself menaced by evil powers. . . moral life itself takes the form of a struggle between good and evil demons. Also, the sensible world assumes a dangerous aspect. Human beings feel themselves estranged and isolated. (Hadot 2020e, p. 242)

In this context, as Cooper reads Hadot, a new conception of the isolated individual, “the ‘I’ at the centre of one’s experiences” came for the first time to be conceived as “constituting in some way one’s very self, the *person* that one is, the subject of one’s actions.” (Cooper 2012, p. 20). Whereas the Stoics and even the Epicureans, Cooper contends, conceived of the person as an embodied, social being, “no philosopher until the later Platonists conceived of a person’s bare consciousness—the ‘I’ at its centre as. . . the object of fundamental concern, the things whose life was in question when one sought to live the best life possible. . .” (Cooper 2012, p. 21). This reconception of the ‘I’, Cooper contends, however, was a foreign importation into pagan philosophy from ideas rooted in Christianity, “as it transformed from a local Jewish cult in the late first century CE, into a world religion by the end of empire” (Cooper 2012, p. 21). The practical corollary of this religious importation into ancient philosophy was “an intense need” for “personal salvation”, in ways foreign to earlier conceptions of philosophy. As a result, whereas Cooper suggests that anything like spiritual exercises could have had “at most a secondary and very derivative function” in ancient philosophy—if they were not wholly absent, as he suggests—before its religious “contamination”, once the Platonist philosophers had adopted this alienated sense of the “I”:

Nothing was easier to suppose that, in order to improve oneself and so one’s life, what one really needed to do—more than to improve one’s grasp on reasons for acting—was to turn inwards, to focus on and attempt to purify, and thereby strengthen, that consciousness. So spiritual exercises came to occupy a more central place in the way of life of philosophy. (Cooper 2012, p. 22)

Hadot himself comments at one point on how slippery debates about what is and is not “religious” can be, given the continuing scholarly *diaphonia* surrounding how to define this category (Hadot 2002b, p. 316). As Paul Griffiths notes, listening to many discussions about the concept of “religion”:

rapidly suggests the conclusion that hardly anyone has any idea what they are talking about—or, perhaps more accurately, that there are so many different ideas in play about what religion is that conversations in which the term figures significantly make the difficulties in communication at the Tower of Babel seem minor and easily dealt with. (At Schilbrack 2022)

Sociologists since Max Weber have identified different catalogues of religious types (agrarian, city-based, lower-class, upper-class, magical, cultic, salvational, etc.). Other commentators have called into question the term ‘religion’s provenance and its validity as a putative universal that could describe all of the different species of beliefs and practices at issue. Further, the debates are more polemically complicated by the implicit normative commitments of many commentators for whom the category is at stake, or the inclusion or not of one or other activity within its extension. Cooper, for instance, clearly positions whatever is “religious” as bad or problematic, and or because it would thus be “non-”, “extra-”, or “ir-rational”. It is clear that neither this axiological perspective nor this description of all “religious” activity is universally shared. Working on the specific relationship between philosophy and theology, for instance, Fernand Brunner identifies not one, but three historical modalities for conceiving this relationship. In addition to the “separation” Cooper accepts as more or less timelessly applying between real philosophy and anything like religion, there is what Brunner calls the approach of “distinction without separation”, in which philosophy has been held to point up to rational conceptions of the divine, as well as stronger claims to the identity between philosophising and the “religious intention” (Brunner 1983, p. 158).

In this paper, with these qualifications noted, we will aim to do two things relative to Cooper’s and related critiques of Hadot’s conception of philosophy as a way of life for collapsing the distinction between philosophy and religion, via the category of “spiritual exercises”. Part 1, a *pars destruens*, will show how Hadot presents three cogent rebuttals of these charges, with which he was familiar as early as the 1980s, following the publication of the first edition of his 1981 collection, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*. In part 2, a *pars construens*, putting aside the vexed category of “religion”, we will examine how Hadot reconsiders the place of the sacred in ancient philosophy, positioning the latter as not the attempt to rationally dispel any sense of the sacred in the world, but to relocate it from within the sanctioned cultic places and temples of traditional Greco-Roman religion to within the inner life of the godlike sage.

2. Hadot, the Spiritual Exercises, and the Philosophers’ Critique of Traditional Religion

Although John M. Cooper does not acknowledge it in *Pursuits of Wisdom*, Pierre Hadot had responded to what can be called the secularist, “collapsing of philosophy into religion” critique in several places. These are led by his 1987 response in the “Postface” to the second edition of *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (2002), wherein Hadot replies to critical reviews of this work by Ruedi Imbach and Fernand Brunner. Firstly, Hadot claimed that his notion that ancient philosophy included the prescription and practice of “spiritual exercises” (Hadot 1995c, pp. 81–125)—such as the premeditation of evils, the premeditation of death, the examination of conscience, attention to the present moment, the view from above, indifference towards indifferent things, and so on (Hadot 2020c, pp. 55–62)—in no way suggests an unacceptable proximity between philosophy and the pagan religions contemporary with the philosophers. What is at issue in this kind of critique is instead both philosophical misunderstanding and historical anachronism.

On one (the philosophical) hand, Hadot makes clear in the classical article on “spiritual exercises” that his choice of the term, admittedly taken from Ignatius Loyola, in no way

implied any dogmatic theological or metaphysical commitments. It was, rather, a last than a first terminological choice. Hadot was aiming to capture the full range of the “exercises” at stake in the ancient philosophical writings, looking back at least to texts such as Epicurus’ letters to Menoeceus and Herodotus. All of these exercises aimed at transforming the inner life of philosophers, so they could live in accordance with the philosophical discourses they accepted to be true, but they were perfectly consistent with the materialist positions of Epicureans and Stoics, as well as those of Platonists and Peripatetics.² The term “spiritual” alone, Hadot contends, is inclusive enough to capture the way that “the entire psychism” is engaged by different such exercises (Hadot 1995c, p. 82), some of which, such as the view from above, engage the imagination, the memory, or even bodily exercises to train the individual to fortitude or to tame the passions. The prescription by philosophers of such means to enable the transformation of individuals’ ways of seeing the world, however, was in no way irrational. “In all of the schools, this effort was strictly rational”, Hadot underscores (Hadot 2002b, p. 316). As we will see, this philosophical exercising certainly in no way presupposed the kinds of reconceptions of the subject and world-denial, which Hadot identifies strictly with the religious, gnostic, magical, and theurgical thinking of the 3rd and 4th centuries CE.

Indeed, on the other (the historical) hand, Hadot reminds us that “the Greek and Roman religions did not involve an inner commitment of the individual but were primarily social phenomena.” (Hadot 2012, p. 36; 2002b, pp. 316–17). They involved ritual, prayer, sacrifice, feast, and festivals. However, they did not ask for a lasting ethical transformation in acolytes of the kind at stake in the philosophical spiritual exercises: “the official religion did not make these demands and the mystery cults, even if they involved a conversion, were totally strangers to the rational and spiritual discipline of philosophy” (Hadot 2002b, p. 316). It is, therefore, the critics who identify any reference to pagan philosophical exercises, such as premeditation of death and forms of meditation as “religious”, who would be guilty of the kind of anachronism we have seen, and which Cooper pits against Hadot. In light of Hadot’s analyses, this identification appears to involve an unexamined extrapolating backwards in light of the Christian legacy which took up and transformed, or “Christianised” the pagan philosophical exercises (See Hadot 1995a, pp. 126–44). Far from marking out philosophical spiritual exercises as recognisably “religious” in the ancient world, they instead represented a profound cultural transformation, which we will return to in part 2.

There is therefore nothing about Hadot’s conception of ancient philosophy as a way of life which would require us to ignore the historical reality of the philosophers’ ongoing critiques of traditional, non-rational forms of religion which Cooper, like Burnet and others before him, would presumably stress to establish a sharp separation between philosophy and religion. Hadot in fact directly affirms that:

... philosophy developed itself as a critique of religion, with destructive critique—for example, that of Xenophanes, who said that men made gods in their own image—or purifying critique, such as that of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Epicureans, and finally the Neoplatonists. Critique is purifying in the sense that philosophy finally tends to transform religion into philosophy. It does this either by developing a theology, *albeit a purely rational theology*, or by using allegory to think about the different divinities in many different ways, as did the Stoics, for whom Zeus was fire, Hera air, and so on. . .³

Herein, we approach perhaps *the* decisive point to which we will be returning. Unlike some more secularist thinkers, Hadot does not hold all “God talk” or language concerning the divine and (especially) the sacred, equally under the suspicion of a mystifying irrationality. If we are to understand ancient philosophy, in anything like the ways ancient philosophers understood themselves, we need to bracket our strict opposition between reason, deemed secular or atheological, and claims concerning the divine and God or the gods. For it is clear that the ancients, such as Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* or Plato nearly everywhere—even, indeed, the Epicureans—did not yet know or respect any such strict

opposition in their thinking. Rather, what the philosophers did, faced with the poetic and civil religion of their contemporaries, was to “rationalise and interiorise” what they encountered (Hadot 2002b, p. 317). The Epicureans for instance could recommend participating in the festivals and forms of prayer, as a means “to contemplate the gods such as the Epicurean theory of nature conceived of them” (Hadot 2002b, p. 317). In Stoic allegorical interpretations of the Homeric–Hesiodic deities, “ancient philosophy completely emptied the traditional myths of their mythological content”, with “the gods of mythology becoming physical forces.” (Hadot 2002b, p. 317). Likewise, in Neoplatonism, the spiritual ascent effected by the philosopher, including forms of bodily and ethical practices, are there “finally to elevate the pupil towards their transcendent and unknowable God, who precisely is totally foreign to traditional religion because it is a purely philosophical concept” (Hadot 2002b, p. 317).

Hadot therefore agrees with defenders of a wholly secularist conception of ancient philosophy that all of the ancient philosophers, before the later Neoplatonism of figures such as Iamblichus (Cooper 2012, pp. 384–87), denied the reality of interventionist gods who could be placated by ritual, sacrifice, prayer, etc. Each of the philosophical schools (outside of the sceptics) instead developed rationalised forms of theological teaching, whilst precisely denying the idea of the poets that “the gods can be swayed” by prayer or won over by sacrifice, prayers, or incantations:

One of the aspects of the critical purification of philosophy in effect consists in denouncing the vanity of prayers of request, to underscore their absurdity, because the most contradictory invocations are raised toward the gods as men ask at the same time for rain and for good weather, for their victory and the defeat of the adversary. . . (Hadot 2012, p. 38)

Just like Cooper, in fact, Hadot in several places expresses strong disapproval of what the former calls the importation of “superstitious and puerile practices into philosophy” after Iamblichus (Hadot 2002b, p. 317). “This intrusion of religion into philosophy had always been rather enigmatic to me”, Hadot anticipates his critic: “I believe that it is an unfortunate attempt to compete with Christianity.” (Hadot 2012, p. 37; cf. Hadot 2020e, pp. 244, 247, 250–51). What Cooper suggests Hadot thinks of all ancient philosophy is an irrationalism that Hadot himself charges only against thinkers after Iamblichus, in no way implicating his analyses of the earlier philosophical spiritual exercises. If we turn to Hadot’s most extensive essay on the devolution of ancient philosophy into early Christianity, “The End of Antiquity”, which we have seen Cooper adducing against Hadot himself, we see that it simply does not bear out Cooper’s interpretation. Here as everywhere else in his *oeuvre*, Hadot clearly distinguishes between the attempts of philosophers as late as Plotinus and Porphyry to make “philosophy a sort of transcendent religion, that of the Supreme God” from their successors like Iamblichus, who sought to place beyond philosophy what they termed “hieratic”:

That is to say, sacred operations, the strict observance of rites and sacraments desired by the gods. . . For [Iamblichus], the position of Plotinus and Porphyry is utopian. Only a small number of men in the evening of life can hope to attain union with the transcendent God [through philosophy]. Human nature is too corrupt because of its union with the body, to normally be able to aspire towards union with this supreme beatitude. The only way which is open towards this divine world is therefore that which the gods themselves have fixed. It can appear repugnant to our reason, which understands neither the sense of the rites, nor even the names that the gods want us to pronounce in the ceremonies. But, precisely, it is necessary to renounce the intelligence for the sake of faith. . . These devoted pagans practice fasting with fervor, make pilgrimages to famous sanctuaries and practice sacrifices, divination and ritual baths. . . One is surprised to find such credulity, naivety and superstition among men who otherwise were remarkable logicians and metaphysicians. (Hadot 2020e, pp. 253–54)

The greater part of the work of this long essay, “The End of Antiquity”, aims to show how this later religious development of pagan thinking reflected a two-way “contamination” between pagan and Christian thought, “in the ardor of the struggle” for cultural hegemony.⁴ For Hadot, what characterises even Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s thinking in regard to Christianity and Gnosticism, in contrast with Iamblichus and his successors—in common with the famous criticisms of Christianity hailing from Proclus and Celsus—is a stern critique of the putative irrationality of claims surrounding a salvific Creator God revealed only to inspired prophets or particular peoples, and seemingly unbound by the rational order He would have created. As Proclus asks, illustrating the pagan philosophical critiques of growing Christianity:

Why did God suddenly bring himself to accomplish the creative act, since he had been inactive for an infinity of time? Was it because of the idea that this [creation] would be best? In that case, did he ignore what was best before then? If he did so. . . it is rather strange; and if, on the contrary, he did know it, why then did he not begin [the act of creation] earlier? (Hadot 2020e, p. 259)⁵

Something is therefore evidently misplaced in criticisms of Hadot’s vision of ancient philosophy as artificially, effectively identifying it with forms of extrarational, religious spirituality. On the one hand, the spiritual exercises Hadot intends in no way presuppose the later ancient embrace of world-denying irrationalism and longing for a salvation from a material world experienced as wholly alienating. On the other hand, Hadot decries the irrationalism of the kinds of spiritual exercises of theurgy, invocation, prayer, and divination which this worldview produces as anti-philosophical. With this said, Hadot sees no paradox in describing the forms of rational theology that ancient philosophers developed, from Parmenides and Plato or Aristotle through to Plotinus and Porphyry, as “little by little, under the influence of nascent rationalism, [introducing] a moral dimension into the representation of the gods” (Hadot 2020f, p. 265). We turn now to the question of how Hadot more positively conceives the development of philosophy and its relation to different forms of religiosity.

3. Hadot on the Changing Conceptions of the Sacred in Graeco-Roman Antiquity

If we wish to address this question, I would argue, contra Cooper and others, that the places we should look for our orientation here lies less in Hadot’s better known treatments of philosophy as a way of life and more in a series of lesser-known essays Hadot wrote on the Greeks’ and Romans’ attitudes toward nature and the sacred. The work of these essays of course culminated in his 2004 work, *Le Voile d’Isis* [*The Veil of Isis*] (Hadot 2004, in English, Hadot 2008). What emerges from these pieces, we will contend, is an account of how philosophy, far from being in effect a passive receptacle of preestablished, timelessly “religious” forms of thinking and practices, was at the forefront of a profound cultural change. At issue is exactly the “nascent rationalism” of which Hadot speaks in “The Models of Happiness Proposed by the Ancient Philosophers”. In this evolution, the Greeks’ and Roman’s traditional conceptions of the sacred were reconceived, and, as it were, relocated from stories of gods and heroes, and the places associated with their agency, into the inner life and way of seeing the world as a whole characteristic of the sage (Hadot 2020g).

The first place to look here is Hadot’s fascinating little 1990 essay “La Génie du lieu dans la Grèce antique” [The Genius of Place in Ancient Greece]. “The first sacred place in Antiquity is the ‘home (*chez-soi*)’; that is to say, the foyer of the house”, the essay begins, “not the fire of the kitchen, but the sacred altar where the fire consecrated to the gods broods (*couve*) continually” (Hadot 2020h, p. 177 [translation amendment ours]). The essay next looks at ancient festivals and places of pilgrimage, sacred sites such as Delphi or Delos which remained consecrated to a God or gods over several millennia. Such *loci* would attract crowds of worshippers, tourists, participants in games and festivals, and host theatrical spectacles. Sacred places like Eleusis became associated with specific cults

and forms of religious experience. As Hadot cites Sabbatucci's *Essai sur la mysticisme grec* concerning the higher *epopteia* at play in the mysteries:

At Eleusis, 'the initiate did not learn his destiny in the other world, but in a brief span of time, he lived this supra-individual life of the other world.' The true secret of Eleusis is thus this experience itself, in which one was plunged into the wholly-other (*le tout-autre*)... (Hadot 2020h, p. 178)

In "The Genius of Place", a further species of ancient, sacred place is touched upon, in addition to these sanctified sites for cultic practice and worship: what Hadot elsewhere calls the "charming place" (*locus amoenus*), such as the cave of Calypso in Homer (Pierre Hadot 2020b, pp. 168–69). Such places, dear to the poets, spoke to a transformed sense of the world, wherein "content with the present moment, one could discover the beauty of nature and find peace of mind and poetic inspiration..." (Hadot 2020b, p. 170). These "charming places" also form one early subject within Hadot's 1989 essay "L'Homme antique et la nature" [Ancient Man and Nature] (Hadot 2020b, pp. 165–76). The essay begins by delineating what *Le Voile d'Isis* will call the "Promethean", occidental approach to nature, already presaged in ancient approaches to mechanics and magic, an approach which seeks to pry open nature's secrets, even by violence, so as to bring her powers under human control (Hadot 2020b, pp. 165–66). Then Hadot turns to a competing attitude: what will become in *Le Voile* the Orphic orientation towards nature (Hadot 2008, pp. 91–100, 155–232). At first, its privileged *loci* were the special "charming places", such as Hesiod, Horace and other poets described, where they received their callings from the Muses who graced and inhabited them. Then, however, Hadot turns to the development of a wider, contemplative comportment towards nature akin to the aesthetic regard at play in modern landscape paintings (Hadot 2008, p. 168):

This gaze of the spectator carves out a privileged field from the totality of nature. But... also unifies it, giving it a certain structure, and organizes it... In this perception of what we could call a corner of nature, in this portion it separates from the whole, this gaze of the spectator simultaneously senses the totality of nature. In other words, the landscape makes us sense our situation as a terrestrial being... (Hadot 2008, p. 168)

Decisive for us in placing these Hadotian passages is the thought which he adds. Such a more contemplative way of seeing nature does not come from the outside: it is in need of conscious cultivation. As Hadot reflects:

this new regard does not involve a gratuitous and unexpected intuition. It is the result of an inner effort, of a spiritual exercise designed to overcome the habit (*habitude*) which makes our way of seeing the world banal and mechanical. (Hadot 2008, p. 171)

The proximity of these considerations concerning the ancient sense of nature to Hadot's conception of ancient philosophy as a way of life involving "spiritual exercises" (Hadot 1995b, 2020c, pp. 55–62) aimed at transforming agents' ways of comporting themselves towards the world is hence direct, or, as it were, to the letter. When we read these essays attentively, we see that both "L'Homme Antique et la Nature" and especially "La Génie du lieu dans la Grèce antique" trace a chronological arc. This arc in each case marks out, exactly, the profound cultural evolution from archaic mytho-poetical Greek culture and religion into the contemplative comportment of the philosophers. "L'Homme antique et la nature", having opened with Homer, ends with sustained reflections on spiritual practices of isolation recommended in the Pythagorean tradition and Marcus Aurelius (Hadot 2020b, pp. 172–74) and on ancient representations of the philosopher in meditation (Hadot 2002b, pp. 313–14, 317). If the first half of "The Genius of Place" (Hadot 2020h) likewise traverses poetic and religious materials, culminating in the revelatory passage on the *epopteia* at Eleusis we cited above, the piece's second part culminates in a description of the Platonic "flight of the soul". This is a philosophical process involving a turn inwards

which nevertheless would open the eye of the soul, via contemplation of the ideas, to the full grandeur of the universe, as if seen from above (Hadot 2020h, pp. 180–81). This inner flight Hadot then presents as the philosophical sublation, or transformation, of the Eleusinian *epopteia*:

The highest summit of what one could call the ‘spiritual mysteries’ of Eleusis is there: in the mystical [Neoplatonic] experience, one cannot learn anything, any more than at Eleusis, but one lives another life: the self (*le moi*) is no longer itself; it has become the absolute Other, it no longer knows who it is, nor where it is, and nevertheless, as Plotinus remarks, it is no longer situated somewhere, but it is carried away (*il est emporté*) so far that it is beyond all place, beyond the self and beyond the all (*de tout*). (Hadot 2020h, p. 181 [our amended translation])

For Hadot, it is therefore clear, the ancient philosophers decisively transformed Greco-Roman understandings of the sacred. It is a matter of “changing the soul, rather than the place”, as Hadot puts it (Hadot 2020h, p. 180). For the philosophers, the need to go to specific places, deemed especially sacred, to sense a connection with the gods, or with the larger order of the world, was a deficient approach. Hadot explains:

true happiness, according to the ancient philosophers, is not found in the places which we visit to change scenery; but in inner displacement, in the spiritual transformation which brings peace of mind and a new way of seeing the world. (Hadot 2020h, p. 179)

What is decisive, whether we are speaking of the Epicureans, Stoics or Platonists, is the claim that philosophy alone could enable people to achieve those goods, whether inner peace, happiness, or a sense of transcendence, that they had previously pursued in the mysteries, popular cults, and dedicated sacred places. When his disciple Amelius wanted to take the master to the temple, Plotinus is hence supposed to have replied: “[i]t is for the gods to come to me, not for me to go to the gods.” (At Hadot 2020e, p. 252). Despite the differences between the competing philosophical schools’ systematic ontologies, we can find versions of this claim in the Platonic presentation of Socrates, the model philosopher, as a new Achilles in the *Apology* (28b–29a); the renowned Stoic superlatives concerning the divine attributes of the sage (Stobaeus, *Epitome of Stoic Ethics*, 11m–11s); or in Lucretius’ hymns to Epicurus in the proems of *De rerum natura* as the true Ceres, the true Hercules, and the true Dionysus, for providing security, consolation, and lasting happiness to the soul, as opposed to the body merely.⁶

In several places, Hadot gives us a threefold formulation of what he takes this goal of ancient philosophy, supplanting religious ideas of salvation, to have been. The figure of the sage, in whom the philosophers pictured their existential ideal, is characterised by inner freedom (*autarcheia*), inner peace (*ataraxia*), and, above all, by what Hadot calls “cosmic consciousness” (*conscience cosmique*) (E.g., Hadot 2020a, p. 230). This third term appears frequently in Hadot’s work on ancient philosophy, following Plotinus, or the *Simplicity of Vision*, although it is not a happy term to translate: perhaps “consciousness of the Whole” would be less literal, but avoid misunderstandings. “Cosmic consciousness” is closely aligned by Hadot with the view from above exercise which he argues is central to the ancient practice as philosophy as an exercise of seeking wisdom, including a comprehensive vision of the ordered whole of nature, leading up to the *archai* (first principles) and God or the gods (DL VII, 93; Plato, *Rep.* 486a; Marcus Aurelius, *Meds.*, VII, 35) (Hadot 2020e, pp. 245–46). On the other hand, the sage’s cosmic consciousness—like that gaze able to “see” and be transported by a landscape which Hadot examines in “Ancient Man and Nature”—simultaneously implies the ability to see the Whole *within each particular*: “that is to say that the complete entirety of reality is unfolded in each instant.” (Hadot 2002a, p. 154). “Indeed”, as Hadot writes of Marcus Aurelius’ “practiced physics” in the *Meditations*, “if one analyses its causes, each event appears as the expression of the will of Nature which is unfolded or reflected in the interconnection of causes which constitute Destiny.” (Hadot 2002a, p. 161). Once we understand philosophically how all things are rationally interconnected, we grasp

that no part of the Whole can be incidental or accidental. As Marcus Aurelius reflects in *Meditations*, III, 2, 1, one of Hadot's favourite passages:

We must also bear in mind things like the following: *even the accessory consequences of natural phenomena* have something graceful and attractive about them. For instance: when bread is baked, some parts of it develop cracks in their surface. Now, it is precisely these small openings which, although they seem somehow to have escaped the intentions which presided over the making of the bread, somehow please us and stimulate our appetite in a quite particular way. . . Ears of corn which bend toward the earth; the lion's wrinkled brow; the foam trailing from the mouth of boars: these things, and many other things like them, would be far from beautiful to look at, if we considered them only in themselves. . . Thus, *if one possesses experience and a thorough knowledge of the workings of the universe*, there will be scarcely a single one of those phenomena which accompany natural processes as a consequence which will not appear to him, under some aspect at least, as pleasant. . . Many such cases will occur, and it is not just anyone who can derive pleasure from them. Rather, *only that person who has become truly familiar with nature and her works will do so* (italics ours). (Hadot 1998b, pp. 168–69)

In the Platonic school in particular, following a precedent looking back to the *Symposium*, the language of Eleusinian initiation (culminating in the *epopteia*, as above) is hence self-consciously refigured, as a pedagogical means to make the philosophical goal of a transformed mode of perceiving the world more comprehensible (Hadot 2020d, pp. 122–23). As Hadot notes, Plutarch's *Iside* hence affirms in the first century CE:

that Plato and Aristotle placed, after the physics, a part of philosophy which they call "epoptic" and which has as its object "what is first, simple and immaterial." They think, Plutarch continues, that "philosophy finds its end, as in a supreme initiation, thanks to a real touch of pure truth which is found in what is first, simple, and immaterial." In order to describe philosophical formation, Theon of Smyrna [in the same period] uses the technical vocabulary of the Eleusinian initiation, calling *teletê* the study of logic, politics (that is to say, ethics) and physics, and calling *epopteia* the knowledge of true beings. . . (Hadot 2020d, p. 122; 1998a, pp. 121–22)

Hadot is, however, on amply supported hermeneutic ground when he considers how, even in Stoic figures like Marcus Aurelius or Seneca, the ancient philosophers adapted recognised religious vocabularies to describe the way of seeing the world aimed at in philosophical formation. In Marcus Aurelius, alongside frequent direct "God-talk" to describe Nature, we see this above all in a language of "piety: (*to hosion*), which the Stoic emperor—here as elsewhere, following Stoic orthodoxy—names as one of the philosopher's virtues. "All the happiness you are seeking by such long, roundabout ways, you can have it all right now. . . if you leave all of the past behind you, if you abandon the future to providence, and if you arrange the *present in accordance with piety and justice*", the philosopher-emperor thus writes (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* XII, 1, 1–2. See Hadot 2020d, p. 134). As Hadot explains of such passages in *The Inner Citadel*: "[i]t should be pointed out here that, for Marcus, 'piety' represents that [philosophical] discipline of desire which makes us consent 'piously' to the divine will, as the latter is made manifest in events." (Hadot 1998b, p. 136). For this reason, according to Marcus, he who acts unjustly will also be acting impiously, by opposing the will of universal Nature, which has made human beings to be each other's fellows (*Meds.* II, 1; III, 4–5; III, 13; IV, 3–4; V, 1; VI, 23; VI, 39, etc.), just as he who lies by misrepresenting some part of the same divine, providential Nature will be guilty of this Stoic form of impiety (Hadot 1998b, pp. 234–35). By contrast, philosophy itself is the true piety, supplanting and perfecting pre-philosophical forms of the virtue, since:

Philosophy wants only that which your nature wants. You, however, wanted something else, which was not in accordance with nature. And yet, what is

more attractive than what is in conformity with nature? Is this not how pleasure leads us astray? Look and see, however, if there is anything more attractive than greatness of soul, freedom, simplicity, benevolence, and piety; for what is more attractive than wisdom itself? (Marcus Aurelius, *Meds.* V, 9, 3–5)

In Seneca, Hadot (2020b) highlights in “Ancient Man and Nature” a language for describing the natural world approximating to modern talk of the sublime. He stresses that the Roman Stoic transposes this to describe the wonder which comes from contemplating what philosophy itself makes possible for human beings: “I find no lesser ecstasy in contemplation of wisdom than the one I find, in other moments, in the contemplation of the world, which I often see as a spectator who looks at it for the first time” (*Ep.* 64, 6) (Hadot 2020b, pp. 170–71; 2002c, pp. 230–31). A further decisive proof text for Hadot’s claims concerning a philosophical sublation of ‘piety’ in the *conscience cosmique* of the sage would be *Letter 41*, “On the God within Us”. “We worship the sources of mighty rivers; we erect altars at places where great streams burst suddenly from hidden sources; we adore springs of hot water as divine, and consecrate certain pools because of their dark waters or their immeasurable depth”, Seneca begins (*Ep.* 41, 3). This is a rehearsing of the traditional sense of the Sacred, identified with privileged, charming places in nature. Yet, Seneca advises Lucilius that, exactly as students of philosophy, “[w]e do not need to uplift our hands towards heaven, or to beg the keeper of a temple to let us approach his idol’s ear, as if in this way our prayers were more likely to be heard” (Seneca, *Moral Letters*, 41, 1). This is because “God is near you, he is with you, he is within you”, as is most manifest in the figure of a sage:

If you see a man who is unterrified in the midst of dangers, untouched by desires, happy in adversity, peaceful amid the storm, who looks down upon men from a higher plane, and views the gods on a footing of equality, will not a feeling of reverence for him steal over you, will you not say: ‘This quality is too great and too lofty to be regarded as resembling this petty body in which it dwells? A divine power has descended upon that man.’ When a soul rises superior to other souls, when it is under control, when it passes through every experience as if it were of small account, when it smiles at our fears and at our prayers, it is stirred by a force from heaven. A thing like this cannot stand upright unless it be propped by the divine. (Seneca, *Moral Letters*, 41, 4–5)⁷

Faced with passages such as these, we can understand the way that Hadot closes his 1987 response to Francophone critiques of his work in the second edition of *Exercices Spirituels et philosophie antique*. Reflecting directly on the significance of the cosmic consciousness in ancient philosophy, in relation to other understandings of the sacred, Hadot writes:

one could speak of the existence, in certain philosophers of antiquity, of a sentiment of the sacred which is related as much to the cosmos as to the inner life itself and its profound depths (*profondeurs*), a sentiment whose intensity can rise to mystical experience, but which is totally foreign to all determinate religion, whether organized or revealed. This sentiment of the sacred is found even in Epicureanism, whose atomic physics nevertheless demystified the universe. As E. Hoffman has clearly shown, by the fact that he considers existence as a pure chance, inexorably unique, the Epicurean welcomes life as a sort of miracle, as something divine, with an immense gratitude. And the philosopher, in discovering with Epicurus the infinite immensity of the universe, experiences, as Lucretius tells us, a ‘sacred shiver’ (*effroi sacré*) and a ‘divine voluptuousness’ (*volupté divine*) which is, without doubt, that of participating, if only for an instant, in the wonder (*merveille*) of existence. (Hadot 2002b, p. 319)

4. Conclusions

How then do things stand on the basis of this inquiry concerning Pierre Hadot's conception of ancient philosophy, and its relationship with religion? This paper has shown (in part 1) the falsity of John M. Cooper's claim that Hadot's notion of spiritual exercises represents the illegitimate, anachronistic attempt to project backwards onto the whole of ancient philosophy the irrationalist, religious developments of the end of antiquity. The spiritual exercises, such as the meditation on death or premeditation of adversities, in no way presuppose the alienated, body-denying conception of the self which animated later ancient mystery cults, Gnosticism, and the theurgical practices of Neoplatonists after Iamblichus. In fact, Hadot shares Cooper's criticism of the latter as representing the end of philosophy in superstition. He acknowledges that the ancient philosophers, as philosophers, conducted criticisms of traditional beliefs concerning the gods, or else, through means such as allegory, sought to rationalise their contents. Hadot also accepts that almost all ancient philosophers, barring perhaps the cynics and sceptics, made rational arguments concerning the nature of the gods. The later modern separation of reasoned discourse or science from all such claims, which Cooper's response to Hadot can seem to presuppose, was foreign to the ancients.

Indeed, what Hadot's analysis of the goals of ancient philosophy as a way of life (examined in part 2) suggests is that, when the ancient philosophers began to recommend forms of spiritual exercises to enable students to live according to their theoretical convictions—at the level of their everyday desires, wishes, fears, emotions, and compartments—they were not embracing the religious practices from the wider culture. They were at the forefront of an immense cultural transformation, including in conceptions of the sacred, the divine, God and the gods, as well as how human beings relate to these data, and to the world more widely. There where nonrational, anthropomorphised, and nonmoral gods were, the philosophers conceived of forms of rational theology, whether it be Aristotle's prime mover or the sublimely indifferent gods of the Epicureans. Moreover, there where, in prephilosophical ancient culture, one supposed that accessing the divine required travelling to particular geographical places and undertaking non-rational forms of sacrificial, ritual, or prayerful modes of conduct, the philosophers proposed that one needed to change one's soul, not one's location. Given the new philosophical orientation, the only access to the divine was through the exercise of reason, supported by spiritual practices which could serve to deeply internalise one's philosophy, and live according to its vision of the ordered Whole. As a result of this, Hadot will argue, in line with Michelet, that "Greek religion culminated with its true god, the sage". The fully enlightened philosophical awareness of the perfected sage, with its inner freedom, its inner peace, and its comprehensive vision of the whole (*conscience cosmique*) became for the philosophers the true "sacred place", what Hadot also calls "a transcendent norm established by reason" (Hadot 1995b, p. 58). Indeed, in a more radical move, Hadot would repeatedly suggest that, when it came to theoretical conceptions of God, the ancient philosophers' rational theology was "based on the model of the sage" (Hadot 1995b, p. 59): "the theology of the Greek philosophers, one might say, is a theology of the Sage" (Hadot 2002c, p. 228).

Pierre Hadot therefore does not collapse the distinction between philosophy and forms of non-rational religiosity, certainly not by identifying spiritual exercises in ancient philosophical texts. What his account of ancient philosophy does is to ask us to reconsider the historical relationship between philosophy, as a perfective search for wisdom, and the goals which people have traditionally sought through forms of religious practice and worship.

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Notes

- ¹ See e.g., Davidson (1995, esp. pp. 1–35); Sharpe (2011); Sharpe and Ure (2021, esp. pp. 1–25); Ambury et al. (2020), and the papers collected in Drexler and Johnson (2021).
- ² (Hadot 1995c, pp. 95–101; 2002b, p. 316). Thus, although many exercises involve thought examining itself, ‘thought’ does not capture the dimensions of imagination and sensibility at play in some exercises (like, for instance, the Stoic exercise of the “view from above”). Although the ancient exercises listed by Philo Judaeus include specialised practices of listening, reading, research and inquiry, some other exercises (like forms of fasting or bodily exercise) are not simply or primarily “intellectual”. As we will close by highlighting, one entire branch of exercises (and ancient texts) aim at the therapy of the passions; whereas others are clearly intended to transform students’ understanding and perception of things and of the world, cultivating what Hadot calls an “objective spirit” able to view particular experiences in light of universal considerations, *sub specie aeternitatis*. See e.g., (Sharpe 2011, 2021; Davidson 1995).
- ³ (Hadot 2012, p. 37, italics ours). The very existence of a ‘rational theology’, we note, is something that Cooper is uncomfortable with, see (Cooper 2012, pp. 380–87).
- ⁴ The ascendancy of Christianity as a salvific religion could not have taken place, Hadot contends, had not the pagan world experienced the political unification of the Roman world under the emperors, with the advent of the ‘hierarchical, monotheistic’ emperor cults, and then the economic decline and political divisions of the 3rd–4th centuries CE. All of these things, he contends, produced a profound transformation in “religious consciousness and of the collective mentality” that was manifest not simply in later Neoplatonism and the growing Churches, but the proliferation of magical practices, mystery cults, and exotic forms of gnosticism: Hadot (2020e, pp. 237–38).
- ⁵ Proclus, at Hadot (2020e, p. 259).
- ⁶ “. . . life without these things/could still go on, as certain races live even today, according to reports./But men could not have lived successfully/without pure hearts, and that is why we claim/this man [Epicurus] is more justly thought a god—from him/life’s tender consolations now extend/even to mighty races and assuage the minds of men”. Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, V, 16–21 (trans. I. Johnson), <http://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/lucretius/lucretius5html.html> (accessed on 10 June 2023).
- ⁷ With Plotinus, one finds the final union of the Soul with One described in ecstatic language: including in inherited religious images of the *hieros gamos* (sacred marriage); analogies with the sexual union of lovers; and of the final *epopteia* or initiation into the higher mysteries at Eleusis each year at the autumn equinox. See esp. Hadot (1998a, p. 35).

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