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The Apophthegmata Patrum and the Greek Philosophical Tradition

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By

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The Apophthegmata Patrum and the Greek Philosophical Tradition

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This dissertation traces the influence of the ancient philosophical schools upon the practices of the early Christian monastic communities that produced the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Both ancient philosophy and early Christianity, especially in its monastic form, were complex social movements defined by their doctrines, but also by their distinctive community structures, pedagogy, and practices. Where studies of the relationship between Christianity and philosophy have tended to focus primarily on doctrinal questions, this project aims to explore various areas in order to develop a more subtle understanding. Both philosophy and monasticism represent elite spiritual groups within larger religious traditions, requiring a conversion in order to set out on the path. These conversions represented the crossing of a bright line, leaving behind an old life in order to adopt a new and fundamentally different identity. This required a measure of withdrawal from society at large, including stepping aside from common political and religious concerns, and, particularly in the monastic case, living in a separate community. It also entailed entering a personal relationship with a teacher, who would guide the convert in the new way of life. This mentorship was characterized by a therapeutic orientation, a desire not merely to teach the disciple new beliefs, but to treat the maladies of the soul. Achieving this therapeutic goal required a radical degree of openness on the part of the disciple, which allowed the teacher to understand all the unique elements of the individual case, and thus to address the disciple's errors frankly. A key element of the content of this teaching was the spiritual exercises, practiced in all the philosophical schools, and later adopted by the monks as well. The practitioner of either spiritual path would regularly examine their conscience in order to evaluate how successfully

they were living up to their ideals. They would also memorize and reflect upon striking sayings from the leading lights of their communities (and, in the monastic case, upon the Christian scriptures). Additionally, they would reflect upon their inevitable mortality. These three practices combined to help form an attitude of focused attention to the present moment known as “vigilance” or “watchfulness”. In this state of vigilance, the philosopher and the monk would be able to instantiate the commitments of their chosen path at every moment of life. While these practices were inflected differently in the different communities that employed them, the similarities are systematic and consistent. It is clear that the monks of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* were building deliberately and creatively upon philosophical precedents.

This dissertation by Sean Garth Moberg fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Early Christian Studies approved by Janet Timbie, Ph.D., as Director, and by Philip Rousseau, D.Phil., and Edward Watts, Ph.D. as Readers.

Janet Timbie, Ph.D., Director

Philip Rousseau, D.Phil., Reader

Edward Watts, Ph.D., Reader

To my parents
“A good education is never wasted.”

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Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

INTRODUCTION

Some recounted that philosophers once wished to test the monks. One came by dressed finely, and they said to him, “You, come here!” He was enraged and abused them. Another monk passed by, a great Libyan, and they said to him, ‘You monk, come here, evil old man.’ He came eagerly. They gave him some slaps. He turned to them also the other cheek. Straightway, they stood him up and bowed to him, saying, ‘Behold, this is truly a monk.’ And, having seated him in their midst, they asked him, saying, ‘What more do you do than us in this Desert? You fast, and we also fast. You keep yourselves pure, and we also keep ourselves pure. Whatever else you do, we also do. What more do you do, then, sitting in the Desert?’ The old man said to them, ‘We hope in the grace of God and we keep watch over the mind.’ And they said, ‘We are not able to observe this.’ And, edified, they sent him away.¹

The holy Gregory said, ‘If you were hoping for nothing difficult when you were about to set out upon philosophy, the beginning was unphilosophical and those providing formation blameworthy. If it was expected but not encountered, it is a grace. But if it was encountered, either be steadfast while suffering, or know that you are deceiving the undertaking.’²

These two sayings from the *Apophthegmata Patrum* illustrate a key reality about early Christian monasticism. From an early stage, monasticism was identified in Christian literature as “the philosophical life” or “philosophy”, and philosophers are often, as above, compared with monks. Through the Middle Ages, it was common to identify monasticism with philosophy, yet it is not immediately obvious that this should be so. It might appear, especially to the contemporary reader, more natural to identify the Christian version of the philosophical life with that of the learned bishop, penning theological treatises and participating in the great Trinitarian and Christological debates of the age, or perhaps with that of a scholar like Origen, a writer and teacher rather than a member of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Surely men of this caliber are the natural counterparts to Plotinus and Porphyry, Zeno and Epicurus, than unevenly educated

¹ Systematic Collection, XVI.25. Citations from the *Apophthegmata Patrum* throughout this dissertation are taken from the Greek Systematic Collection (hereafter “Systematic Collection”) in Jean-Claude Guy’s critical edition with French translation: Guy, Jean-Claude, trans. *Les apophtegmes des pères: Collection systématique, vol. 1-3*. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1993, 2003, 2005. All translations of ancient texts are my own, unless otherwise noted.

² Systematic Collection, VII.6.

desert-dwellers. And yet, despite these apparent and perhaps more obvious parallels, it is the monks, not the theologians, who are identified as the Christian “philosophers”.³

This fact has important implications for both monasticism and philosophy. On the monastic side, it means that these strange men (and some women) who had gone past the edge of civilization in order to wrestle with demons and meet the living God face to face in the great silence of solitude were understood (and, as the *Apophthegmata* emerges from the monastic context itself) understood themselves to be in conversation with, and in some sense the rightful heirs of, the philosophers. In seeking the roots of Christian monasticism, then, we cannot neglect the world of ancient philosophy. A complex social movement like monasticism, exploding across the Empire and beyond and resonating with a wide variety of cultures and social classes cannot be reduced to any one cause, nor can its methods and practices be explained in terms of any single source. It is clear, however, that philosophy was one element in the development of Christian monasticism in the fourth century and beyond. Understanding early monasticism necessarily requires understanding ancient philosophy and the role it played in shaping the ascetic movement.

The implications of the identification of the two movements are similarly consequential on the philosophical side. The common picture of philosophy, defined in terms of academic achievement, production of learned treatises and lectures, and penetrating intellectual insight cannot account for this connection.⁴ Instead, we must turn to a much fuller picture of

³ It goes without saying that the bishops and scholars may also have practiced asceticism, and many monks were well-educated and profoundly theologically insightful – the borders between the two are porous, as the saying from Gregory Nazianzus above indicates. Nevertheless, the appellation “philosopher” designates the monks primarily, on account of their lives, not their learning.

⁴ If the connection were only made in reference to highly educated monks such as Evagrius Ponticus, then this picture might suffice. It is not so narrowly drawn, however. Monasticism is described as philosophy, full stop, not solely when the monk in question is of an intellectual bent.

philosophy, not just as an intellectual pursuit, but as a comprehensive way of life, governing every element of the practitioner's existence. Scholars like Pierre Hadot (discussed at length below, especially in chapter 3) have been pushing scholarship on ancient philosophy in this direction for decades. The fact that the ascetic movement was seen by contemporaries as a similar enterprise to philosophy implies that philosophy was understood in a broad sense, having to do with the use of self-discipline and spiritual practice in order to achieve a rightly-ordered life.

In this dissertation, I intend to pursue the connection between monasticism and philosophy through the lens of one especially significant monastic source, the Systematic Collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, also known as the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. I will demonstrate that monasticism drew in significant ways upon the philosophical tradition, and not just at one stage or another of the monastic life. In fact, important parallels exist between monastic and philosophical practice from the very moment that a prospective practitioner decides to set out upon one or the other course through life. Additional parallels emerge throughout the process of instruction by which these new disciples are brought into their respective communities. Finally, the spiritual practices of the Desert ascetics are heavily influenced by philosophical precedents. The Desert practices described in the *Apophthegmata* are marked by the encounter between Christian monasticism and Greek philosophy at every point.

Early Christianity and Greek Philosophy

In pursuing this course of study, I am consciously entering into one of the most venerable fields of inquiry in the realm of early Christian studies. Volume after volume has been published on the relationship between early Christianity and ancient philosophy. It is not possible in this space to provide anything like an exhaustive survey of the work that has been done in the field.

Instead, earlier scholarship will be categorized into three main schools of thought (though the boundaries are not firm). After explaining and critically evaluating these schools of thought, I will note my own position in relation to them, and also note a significant gap left by earlier studies of Christianity and philosophy. This project aims to make a small contribution towards filling this gap.

The first school of thought on the relationship between early Christianity and Greek philosophy may be termed the “dependence” view. Adherents of the dependence model argue that early Christian thought came to be so heavily dominated by Greek philosophical thinking that uniquely Christian commitments came to be displaced by an alien force, that of Hellenistic philosophy. On this view, within a few centuries Christian theology largely came to be philosophy by another name. For the most part the dependence approach was a product of early twentieth century scholarship heavily influenced by secularist or Protestant positions that had little regard for Catholic and Orthodox developments. Nevertheless, this approach does continue to find adherents in the present day, albeit in smaller numbers and with much less impact on the scholarship at large. We find this view as early as Adolf von Harnack, who, under the influence of his late-nineteenth century liberal Protestant background, developed the idea of Hellenization (Hellenisierung), a gradual turn towards Greek modes of thought and away from the original “Enthusiastic and Apocalyptic” elements of Christian thought.⁵ Thus in the end, Harnack asserts that the Eastern church “takes the form, not of a Christian product in Greek dress, but of a Greek

⁵ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 1. Translated by Neil Buchanan (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1895), 49. Harnack reiterates the same point in *What Is Christianity?*, claiming that “This, then, is the first force at work in the transformation [of Christianity in the early centuries]: the *original enthusiasm*, in the large sense of the word, *evaporates*, and the religion of law and form at once arises.”: Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* Translated by Thomas Bailey Saunders (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 199. The influx of Hellenism came first at the level of philosophical teachings, according to Harnack, but proceeding from there to include sacred mysteries and ultimately mythology as well; cf. Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, 201.

product in Christian dress.”⁶ Harnack is followed in this school of thought by Harold Cherniss, whose 1930 work *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa* makes no attempt to conceal its ideological presuppositions. Cherniss terms reason faith’s “natural enemy” and identifies the pair as “two incompatible sides of human mentality.”⁷ Because of this, he sees Gregory’s attempts at uniting the two as producing only a “queer bastardy”⁸ in which Gregory “contradicts himself at every point.”⁹ The whole of Cherniss’ view is summed up in one oft-cited quotation: “But for some few orthodox dogmas which he could not circumvent, Gregory has merely applied Christian names to Plato’s doctrine and called it Christian theology. These few dogmas, however, make of his writings a sorry spectacle.”¹⁰ A few scholars remain who uphold this view, and despite the fact that they operate with greater sophistication and are more difficult to dismiss than the bombastic Cherniss, the view itself is decidedly on the wane in favor of more nuanced approaches.¹¹

The second school of thought on Christianity and philosophy might be described as the “influence” position, which holds that, while the core of distinctive Christian beliefs was not abandoned in favor of Hellenic principles, it was fundamentally modified by the encounter with philosophy. There is a substantial range of positions in this school, with some scholars arguing for a major influx of Greek thought leaving only a small and marginalized core of uniquely Christian beliefs, while others see the Christian core as retaining most of its integrity, with only a

⁶ Harnack, *What Is Christianity*, 221.

⁷ Harold Fredrik Cherniss. *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Lennox Hill Pub. & Dist. Co., 1930), 1.

⁸ Cherniss. *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa*, 33.

⁹ Cherniss. *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa*, 63.

¹⁰ Cherniss. *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa*, 62.

¹¹ Charalambos Apostolopoulos, another scholar of Gregory of Nyssa, considers Gregory to have been a Neoplatonist, with only a superficial Christian exterior. Thus he speaks of the Christian elements in Gregory’s thinking as “deliberate camouflage” (“bewussten Tarnung”), covering up his true Hellenism. Charalambos Apostolopoulos, *Phaedo Christianus. Studien zur Verbindung und Abwägung des Verhältnisses zwischen dem platonischen Phaidon und dem Dialog Gregors von Nyssa Über die Seele und die Auferstehung* (Frankfurt 1986), 287.

few noteworthy modifications. What distinguishes this group as a whole from the dependence viewpoint is that all the scholars included here insist upon an enduring contribution made by the Christian (including the Judaic background) element in developing theological reflections. Pierre Hadot works within this school, but sees a more serious deviation from Christianity's original message, describing philosophy as an alien force influencing Christianity's early development.¹² The critical shift was Christianity's decision to present itself to the Greco-Roman world not just as the perfection of Judaism, but as a (indeed, *the*) philosophy.¹³ At the same time, he emphasized "the incomparable originality of Christianity."¹⁴ Of paramount importance here is the eschatological perspective which Hadot rightly identifies as essential to Christianity, while being "completely foreign to the Greek mentality and to the perspectives of philosophy."¹⁵ This eschatological view, which differentiates Christianity from philosophy so sharply, lies at the heart not only of Christianity, but specifically of Christian asceticism. Even in the New Testament, the Christian preference for celibacy is couched in eschatological terms,¹⁶ and this orientation persists throughout Late Antiquity.¹⁷ As Christianity encounters philosophy, on Hadot's view, there is a shift in priorities, but not a deformation of core commitments.¹⁸

¹² Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* Translated by Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 238.

¹³ This turn brought with it the entrance of philosophy's "spiritual exercises", discussed at length in chapter 3, into Christianity. Pierre Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*. Translated by Marc Djaballah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 36.

¹⁴ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Edited by Arnold I. Davidson, Translated by Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 129.

¹⁵ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy*, 237. Hadot does note the role of Philo in working towards a Jewish philosophical perspective, including important developments in "Logos" theology.

¹⁶ Cf. the discussion of marriage in I Corinthians 7, esp. verse 31.

¹⁷ As the discussion of the practice of contemplation of death in chapter 3 will illustrate, elements of philosophical practice, when incorporated into a Christian ascetic context, had to be re-shaped in order to conform to the eschatological view.

¹⁸ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy*, 252.

A number of other scholars can be classed in this school with Hadot, including some who focus on doctrine. For example, Michel René Barnes has traced the philosophical background to Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian theology with remarkable subtlety. More so than Hadot, Barnes explicitly distances himself from the extremes of a Harnack or a Cherniss (both of whom he specifically cites with disapproval),¹⁹ noting key differences between Nyssa's views and those of his philosophical sources.²⁰ For Barnes, certain aspects of philosophy are rejected, others are modified, and others still are adopted, to the point of leading to changes in (or at least determining the options for) theology. Even central issues like whether one should be an Arian or a Nicene can be determined by one's philosophical viewpoints. A similar perspective, but one moving more towards the "use" framework that will be explored below, can be found in the works of Ilaria Ramelli, who has extensively examined Christian Platonism from Origen to the Cappadocians. "It is not the case that a 'pure' Christianity was subsequently Hellenised: the NT itself was already Hellenised to some extent, and the Christian κήρυγμα, intended for all nations and cultures, was a σκάνδαλον for the Jews as well as μωρία for the Greeks," Ramelli argues.²¹ Because of its universal claims, Christianity could speak in a more universal idiom, including Greek philosophical language. It is in this connection that Ramelli speaks not of the Hellenization of Christianity, but of the Christianization of Hellenism. Hellenism had to be converted and its thought had to undergo what Ramelli calls a "transforming reception".²² Thus

¹⁹ Michel René Barnes, *The Power of God: Δύναμις in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001) 3, 6.

²⁰ Michel René Barnes, "Eunomius of Cyzicus and Gregory of Nyssa: Two Traditions of Transcendent Causality," *Vigiliae Christianae* 52 (1998): 84.

²¹ Ramelli goes on to trace this in early post-New Testament writings, pointing out that the hero of the *Acts of Philip* gets into trouble specifically for introducing a foreign *philosophy*, not an alien *religion*. Likewise, Justin Martyr defines Christianity as "φιλοσοφία θεία." Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Origen, patristic philosophy, and Christian Platonism: Re-thinking the Christianization of Hellenism," *Vigiliae Christianae* 63 (2009): abstract, 219-20.

²² Ramelli, "Origen, patristic philosophy, and Christian Platonism," 257. The shape of this transforming reception can be found in many of Ramelli's works, including Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Christian Soteriology and Christian Platonism: Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Biblical and Philosophical Basis of the Doctrine of Apokatastasis,"

while Ramelli does see Christianity undergo real change through its encounter with philosophy, it retains its distinctive identity.

Finally, there is a third school of thought that has developed in recent years. This perspective has been identified by Anthony Meredith with the term “use”.²³ According to this theory, while the shape of Christian theology, the directions in which it develops, and the language in which it is expressed may be influenced by Hellenistic models, Christianity’s core convictions are not fundamentally altered by the introduction of philosophical language. Philosophy is not, on this view, an equal partner with theology, as the influence approach might indicate, and it is certainly not the dominant partner. Rather, it is a tool by which basically Christianity concepts are explained, understood, and defended. Meredith is perhaps the most forthright exponent of this school of thought, and it is from his work that I have taken the term “use” for this perspective. On this view, the Fathers employ philosophy as a tool to understand divine revelation, since texts always require interpretation. This view is grounded in the conviction that “Both reason and revelation emanate from the same divine source. There ought not, therefore, to be a chasm between the two.”²⁴ This was the view expressed by Justin Martyr²⁵ as well as Clement of Alexandria, who saw philosophy as a gift from God and part of the

Vigiliae Christianae 61 (2007), Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, “The Philosophical Stance of Allegory in Stoicism and its Reception in Platonism, Pagan and Christian: Origen in Dialogue with the Stoics and Plato,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* vol. 18, issue 3 (2011), and more.

²³ “In his adaptation of classical philosophy Gregory adopts a policy of use or *chrēsis*: he employs philosophy whilst striving not to be taken over by it, above all by Plato.” Anthony Meredith, “Gregory of Nyssa,” in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, vol. 1, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 474-5.

²⁴ Anthony Meredith, *Christian Philosophy in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, Ltd., 2012), 6.

²⁵ “Philosophy, which alone leads us to and unites us with God, was ‘sent down to human beings’, but the existence of competing philosophical schools, including Platonism, shows that many have failed to discover its nature.” Christianity represents the full, true philosophy. Dennis Minns, “Justin Martyr,” in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, vol. 1, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 261-2.

providential plan for humanity.²⁶ Meredith does not advocate a naïve view in this regard; the fact that philosophy is at the service of theology does not mean that it has no effect upon what points are emphasized, how positions are developed, and so forth. The tools at hand certainly do influence the approach one takes. When speaking about divinity, ethics, and metaphysics in Late Antiquity, use of philosophical language was unavoidable, and this shaped the directions taken by Christian theology. The distinctive element in the “use” school of thought is the position that these directions are fundamentally consonant with that which is uniquely Christian, and are not deviations.²⁷ This view has gained increasing traction in recent years, finding expression in a variety of scholarly works.²⁸

It is worth noting, in brief, that the mainstream of scholars employing the “use” model should be carefully distinguished from those advocating an extreme version of it, namely the

²⁶ Meredith, *Christian Philosophy in the Early Church*, 68. See also Catherine Osborne, “Clement of Alexandria,” in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, vol. 1, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 281. Osborne notes that, for Clement, “*Logos* in us and *Logos* in Scripture are both expressions of the same source.” Although Clement and Justin ground their arguments somewhat differently, the fundamental conclusion is similar.

²⁷ Additionally, we might note the number of distinctive Christian positions that directly conflicted with central tenets of philosophical thought. Among these were the creation of the world *ex nihilo* (as opposed to the philosophical position that the world was eternal), the Trinity (as opposed to the strict Unitarianism of most philosophers), and the Incarnation (which conflicted with ideas of divine transcendence, the dubious nature of the material world, and the view that “the higher does not know the lower”, which would preclude such direct divine intervention in human affairs). Except in highly unusual cases such as Synesius of Cyrene (cf. Jay Bregman, *Synesius of Cyrene: Philosopher-Bishop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982)), we do not find these sorts of Christian distinctives being denied and modified.

²⁸ Also working on Gregory of Nyssa, Lucian Turcescu writes that “the church fathers, Gregory of Nyssa in particular, used a certain method of reception of ancient culture into Christianity, which they call *χρησις* (use), whereby any philosophical speculation is relevant for a Christian only if it agrees with revelation.” Lucian Turcescu, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of Divine Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 25-6. Similarly, Ayres and Radde-Gallwitz write that Basil was interested in “shaping a Christian vision of *paideia* within which attention to God as made known in the Scriptures remains paramount” and that Basil was quite capable of putting philosophical principles to uses of which the philosophers themselves would have disapproved, as, in Basil, “we have always to deal with a Christian thinker, who bends all to his own use.” Lewis Ayres and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, “Basil of Caesarea,” in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, vol. 1, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 460, 70. Again, Emanuela Prinzivalli describes Origen’s approach in the following manner: “just as geometry, music, grammar, rhetoric and astronomy are considered auxiliary to philosophy, so philosophy is an aid to Christianity.” Emanuela Prinzivalli, “Origen,” in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, vol. 1, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 285.

idea that philosophy never played any significant role in the early Church's thought at all, and that any Christian deployment of philosophical terminology was wholly superficial. Walther Völker, for example, argued that Clement of Alexandria only adopted philosophy for evangelistic purposes, in order to communicate the Gospel to philosophically-inclined pagans.²⁹ In the normative "use" model, philosophy did not change Christianity's essence, but did play a major role in shaping early Christian thought. It was not mere window-dressing.

The increasingly-prominent "use" model seems to me to have the most to recommend it. First, this (i.e. "use") is what many of the Church Fathers believed themselves to be doing, frequently described by means of an allegorical reading of Exodus 12:35-6, which tells of the plundering of the Egyptians by the Israelites as they left Pharaoh's realm.³⁰ From Origen³¹ to Nyssa³² to Augustine³³ and beyond, there is a tradition (which dates back to Philo³⁴) of understanding the spoils of the Egyptians as symbolically referring to the role of Greek wisdom in the Church. Second, the use model best accounts for the way in which philosophy functions in patristic discourse. Christianity held a number of doctrines incompatible with pagan

²⁹ Er [Clement] ist immer von dem Grundsatz ausgegangen, dass die Philosophie nur das Äussere, gleichsam die Schale sei, die das Christentum – um ein Bild des Autors anzuwenden – als Nusskern in sich birgt." Walther Völker, *Der Wahre Gnostiker nach Clemens Alexandrinus* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1952), 9. Heinrich Dörrie, reacting against the excesses of the "dependence" model, advocated a similar view. Cf. Heinrich Dörrie, "Die Andere Theologie: Wie stellten die frühchristlichen Theologen des 2.-4. Jahrhunderts ihren Lesern die 'Griechische Weisheit' (= den Platonismus) dar?", *Theologie und Philosophie*, 56 (1981): 24, 30. Dörrie thus concludes that and "antike Terminologie hätte sie als ἀδιάφορα, als irrelevant bezeichnet." Dörrie, "Die Andere Theologie?", 46.

³⁰ The despoliation of Egypt is also mentioned in Genesis 15:14, at which point God foretells the event to Abraham.

³¹ "Origen is the first Christian writer to identify the treasures of Egypt with the encyclical disciplines and in doing so clearly follows Philo's Heir." Joel Stevens Allen, *The Despoliation of Egypt in Pre-rabbinic, Rabbinic and Patristic Traditions* (*Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae; Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language*) (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 232.

³² Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 2:115. In the following paragraph, Gregory follows Origen in connecting the use of the spoils for the sacred vessels and the use of Greek learning to adorn the Church.

³³ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.40.60.

³⁴ Allen, *The Despoliation of Egypt in Pre-rabbinic, Rabbinic and Patristic Traditions*, 107. See Allen's text for a sound treatment of the full range ancient interpretations of the despoliation, both Jewish and Christian, and in considerably greater detail than can be managed here. His treatments of Philo, Origen, Augustine, and Gregory of Nyssa are particularly relevant here.

philosophical teaching, including the non-eternity of the world, the resurrection of the body, a Trinity as opposed to a monad (at least among Nicene Christians), the Incarnation, and so forth. When we find non-biblical doctrines entering Christian teaching, they usually serve as explanations and clarifications. For example, the Platonic doctrine of the unreality of evil is used to support early Christian arguments defending God's goodness. Finally, despite the dominance of Platonism, a certain eclecticism has been noticed by many scholars as characteristic of early Christian appropriation of philosophy. Anthony Meredith observes it in the Apostle Paul and the early apologists,³⁵ Catherine Osborne in Clement of Alexandria,³⁶ Emanuela Prinzivalli in Origen,³⁷ and so on. This willingness to draw freely from a variety of philosophical sources indicates a critical reception and evaluation that is consistent with the use model. This dissertation serves to bolster this argument, while approaching the question from the angle of practice rather than doctrine. Christian monasticism does not appear deformed or disordered by philosophy, but rather philosophical models appear as tools by which distinctively monastic ends may be achieved.

One other comment must be made regarding the long conversation on the relationship between early Christianity and Greek philosophy. In all the learned volumes that have been produced in support of different sides in this debate, there is an overwhelming emphasis on one aspect of the relationship, namely the doctrinal element. To take one significant example, in the two volumes of *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, containing many first-rate essays on the connections between Christianity and philosophy, there is no mention of the

³⁵ Anthony Meredith, *Christian Philosophy in the Early Church*, 41, 52.

³⁶ Catherine Osborne, "Clement of Alexandria," 271-3.

³⁷ Prinzivalli, "Origen," 286.

impact of philosophy on Christianity apart from its influence on early Christian doctrine and reasoning. But this is only one aspect of a more complex relationship.

Neither Christianity nor philosophy can be reduced to the set of propositions to which members adhere and the rationales for those propositions. Both are social movements that attracted diverse individuals across varying regions, time periods, and social contexts, and must be studied in terms of lived practices, communities, pedagogies, and distinctive ways of life. Some scholars, such as Pierre Hadot and the group gathered around Samuel Rubenson at Lund University for the Early Monasticism and Classical Paideia research project, have pushed into this more complex ground, but it remains a minority approach. This is the approach that I intend to pursue in this dissertation. By focusing upon one text (a text notably practical rather than doctrinal in orientation) in the Christian monastic tradition, I aim to illuminate the ways in which this text, and by extension the community which produced it, builds upon philosophical precedents to shape its lived practices. In so doing, I hope to achieve two goals. First, this project should illuminate the understanding of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and the early Christian monastic movement from which it emerges. By better grasping the sources for fourth and fifth century ascetic practice, we can better understand how the movement functioned and the place it held in Late Antique society. Second, it is my hope that growing awareness of the deep relationship between monasticism and philosophy at the level of practice will help broaden the conversation on Christianity's use of the wisdom of the Greeks.

The *Apophthegmata Patrum* as a Source

While a diversity of philosophical material is employed in the pages below, drawn from many different authors, time periods, and schools of thought, on the monastic side, the present work leans almost exclusively upon the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, and specifically upon the

Systematic Collection thereof. Given the narrow focus upon one text, it is essential to have a thorough grasp of the nature of the text and the ways in which I plan to use it. For this reason, I will devote this section to exploring what the Sayings tradition is, how (successfully and unsuccessfully) it has been used in prior scholarship, and how I plan to employ it here. It is my conviction that the *Apophthegmata* is not only one of the most arresting texts to emerge from Late Antiquity, but also one of the most valuable.

Text and Context

The history of the oral transmission and manuscript record of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* has been ably summarized by many scholars over the years.³⁸ For this reason, an extended treatment of the details of stemmata and the like does not seem necessary here; a relatively brief review of the textual history of the Sayings should suffice, complemented by a consideration of the genre into which the *Apophthegmata* should be classified.

The Sayings tradition takes its origin, as best as can be discerned, in the actual oral teaching and experience of Egyptian monks, especially but not exclusively those at Scetis, who lived mainly in the fourth century, with some early fifth century teachers represented as well. There is no one set form for the *Apophthegmata*, with sayings ranging from extremely brief pronouncements³⁹ to extended stories spanning a number of pages.⁴⁰ Certain patterns are

³⁸ To take a few examples: Wilhelm Bousset, *Apophthegmata: Studien zur Geschichte des ältesten Mönchtums* (Tübingen: Verlags J. C. B. Mohr, 1923), 1-93, Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1995), 145-52, Guy, *Les apophthegmes des pères: Collection systématique, vol. 1*, 18-32, Per Rönnegård, *Threads and Images: The Use of Scripture in Apophthegmata Patrum* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 5-14, Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 5-9, Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 76-88, William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 169-71.

³⁹ The final chapter of the Systematic Collection (XXI) contains many of these shortest sayings, a number of which are not even ten words long in Greek.

⁴⁰ These longer narratives appear in several chapters in the Systematic Collection, but significantly more appear in the chapter on visionaries (XVIII) than anywhere else. When they do appear in other chapters, they are often also

favored, however, with most sayings taking the form of a “word” given by a spiritual father to an inquiring disciple or pilgrim. Often the inquirer approaches the elder with a specific problem, but on some occasions they simply ask for a “word”, trusting the discernment of the teacher to decide what needed to be said. This initial level of the *Apophthegmata* – the level of assumed concrete historical experience – then passes into the second level, that of oral transmission. The saying or story here passes out of its original context and becomes the collective property of the community; it is to a certain extent universalized.⁴¹ Those “words” which, for one reason or another, made a great impact upon one monk were passed on to others. A teacher might appeal to something his teacher had said to him in his youth, or the authority of one of the great elders like Poemen or Macarius might be invoked. For one reason or another, and in one way or another, those sayings and stories that were valuable to the community spread among the monks.⁴²

How long the teaching of the elders remained purely oral is difficult to say. There does not seem to be any sure way to set a definitive date on the first efforts to record the Sayings in a written form.⁴³ These efforts may have been motivated by a sense that the early generations of Desert Fathers were passing away, and their wisdom needed to be preserved in order to guide the community in the years ahead; they may also have been motivated by the rise of ascetic literature and a desire to contribute to the new genre. Additionally, as Egyptian monks found themselves

stories of visions or miracles which have, for one reason or another, been classed under a different heading. Guy believes that these longer stories must have existed separately from the rest of the *Apophthegmata* material, only being integrated into the collections at a late stage, but his conclusion is not certain, dependent as it is on his commitment to the principle that the shortest, simplest sayings must be the earliest – a commitment that has come under critique more recently. Guy, *Les apophtegmes des pères: Collection systématique, vol. 1*, 23.

⁴¹ Guy, *Les apophtegmes des pères: Collection systématique, vol. 1*, 24-5.

⁴² Herein lies a critical point: even at the oral stage, there is no question of straight reporting on the history of the community. Only those sayings that were *useful* in some way would actually be passed along. The selection process is already underway.

⁴³ Guy, *Les apophtegmes des pères: Collection systématique, vol. 1*, 26-7.

in other regions for various reasons, including barbarian incursions into Scetis, the push to preserve the fragile memory of their past would likely have grown stronger. Whatever the motivation, it seems that the Sayings were originally set down in writing piecemeal and haphazardly, only later being organized into the great collections in which we meet them today. These collections came together in Palestine, most likely beginning in the late fifth century and continuing into the sixth. The first to be brought together were the Greek Alphabetical Collection and its companion Anonymous Collection. The Alphabetical material is organized by the name of the monk featured in each saying, and serves to provide a series of portraits of the various elders whose memories were to be preserved. Later, the Systematic Collection grew out of a desire to present in an organized way the teachings of the earlier Fathers, rather than to encounter the individual Fathers one by one.⁴⁴ These various collections were translated into essentially every ancient Christian language, and have gone on to exercise tremendous influence over the development of Christian monasticism throughout the world.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the critical use of the *Apophthegmata*, a note on the genre of the text is in order. It is not necessarily possible to impose one single genre upon the entirety of the disparate material collected in the *Apophthegmata* (see above, note 40). However, the great majority of the sayings are of a similar type (a few sentences to a paragraph long, an edifying message or anecdote delivered by an established spiritual father). Given this fact, we can speak with some confidence about how to categorize at least the great bulk of the sayings. The *Apophthegmata* immediately strike the reader as distinct from other prominent types of early Christian and ascetic literature. Their extremely brief form separates them from the more familiar *Vita* form in which we are accustomed to meeting everyone from Antony to Martin of

⁴⁴ Guy, *Les apophtegmes des pères: Collection systématique*, vol. 1, 31-2.

Tours. Likewise, they are obviously unlike a theological treatise or rhetorical speech. The stories are spare, bear little adornment, and do not demonstrate great literary refinement. The Greek is correct, but of an indisputably plain, simple style.

Despite this simplicity, however, there may not be quite as much distance between a bare *apophthegm* and a richly-embroidered Cappadocian homily as we might initially think, and in this connection lies a vital clue to what sort of literature the Sayings really are. The work of Lillian Larsen in particular has been influential in demonstrating the similarities between the *Apophthegmata* and the *chreia* material which formed one of the pillars of Greek *paideia* from the earliest grammatical instruction up through the sophisticated rhetorical schools of Libanius and others. The *chreia* is defined as a “brief reminiscence referring to some person in a pithy form”,⁴⁵ and literally means something that is useful (understood here in a moral sense).⁴⁶ These brief narratives contained stories of various luminaries – philosophical, heroic, political, etc. – that had instructive value for the reader. The *chreia* were not primarily read for their own sake, however. They were tools employed at every level of the Greek educational system. As Ronald Hock and Edward O’Neil explain further in their major study of the *chreia*, they were used to teach basic writing skills, noun declensions, analysis of parts of speech, and more at the lower levels of education.⁴⁷ They also played a significant role in the *progymnasmata* central to early rhetorical education. The rhetorical student would take one of these brief stories and expound

⁴⁵ George Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 204. A few examples of the *chreia* form, translated in Ronald Hock and Edward O’Neil, *The Chreia and Ancient Rhetoric: Classroom Exercises* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002): “Alexander, the king of the Macedonians, on being urged by his friends to attack his enemies at night, said, ‘It is not fitting for a king to steal the victory.’” (29) “Epameinodas the Theban general said, ‘Best is the death that comes in war.’” (35) “Marcus Porcius Cato said that the roots of education are bitter, its fruits more pleasant.” (71) “Alexander, on being asked by someone where he kept his treasures, pointed to his friends.” (141) The literary similarity to the *Apophthegmata* here should be clear.

⁴⁶ Lillian Larsen, “Pedagogical Parallels: Re-reading the *Apophthegmata Patrum*” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2006), 81-2.

⁴⁷ Hock and O’Neil, *The Chreia and Ancient Rhetoric*, 1-78.

upon its virtues at length, following set compositional structures. As Larsen has demonstrated, the *Apophthegmata* bears considerable formal similarity to the *chreia* material.

This connection is significant, as it demonstrates that the monks who recorded and compiled the *Apophthegmata* were familiar with and in active conversation with elements of the tradition of Greek *paideia*. The monks were engaged in the development of a new, Christian literature that could fill many of the same roles that *chreia* based on the work of philosophers and other pagan cultural icons did. It is possible that the *Apophthegmata* were even used among the Desert Fathers in order to teach new monks how to read and write.⁴⁸ As many of the *chreia* include stories from the philosophers (stories that bear a striking resemblance, as it happens, to the contents of authors like Diogenes Laertius), the use of the same genre in the Desert puts the monks directly into conversation with an element of the philosophical tradition. Of particular note here is the fact that that element was not the discursive or doctrinal element, but an element oriented towards practice. Finally, the use of the *chreia* format indicates that scholars have been correct in seeing the *Apophthegmata* as a pedagogical text.

Critical Use of the Apophthegmata Patrum

The *Apophthegmata* has held a firm grip on scholarly interest for decades now, especially following the growth in studies of Late Antiquity generally and asceticism specifically in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As the next sub-section, on the value of the *Apophthegmata*, will show, this has to do with both the considerable intrinsic interest of these collections of monastic wisdom as well as their tremendous subjective ability to captivate readers. There is no doubt as to their high literary quality. That they do not easily fit into

⁴⁸ We know that the Pachomians required new initiates to become literate (Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 127), and it is certainly conceivable that the Desert Fathers, at least in some cases, made similar requirements, employing Desert wisdom in the elementary exercises.

modern literary categories only serves to strengthen their appeal. Particularly prominent among the literary virtues of the Sayings is their apparent immediacy. Any reasonably sympathetic reader, turning to the *Apophthegmata*, naturally feels himself transported to the fourth century, knocking on the door of Poemen and asking for a word. For this reason, it is too easy to assume that, in the Sayings, there is a treasure-trove of unmediated evidence that has passed directly from the Desert of the fourth century to the libraries of the twenty-first. Closely connected to this conviction is the attempt to develop methods of formal criticism aimed at discerning the earliest strata of the *Apophthegmata* – the simplest, the most primitive, the most original stage – in the hopes of finding there the unadulterated fourth century.⁴⁹

This tendency to take the Sayings too readily at their word has unfortunately marked much of the scholarship on the various collections. The most extreme version of this view can probably be found in the work of Graham Gould, who has argued that “there can be no doubt – especially when it is the teaching of the monks themselves which we wish to consider – that the most important single source for our knowledge of the monasticism of fourth- and fifth-century lower Egypt is the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.”⁵⁰ Gould goes on to approvingly cite Owen Chadwick’s claim that the *Apophthegmata* constitutes a sort of monastic “‘raw material’ from which an account of the teaching of the Desert Fathers can be built.”⁵¹ Throughout his work, Gould takes the *Apophthegmata* essentially at its word as a representation of life in fourth-century Egypt. This is surprising, given the extent to which his own able summary of the

⁴⁹ For an early and influential effort in this direction, see Bousset, *Apophthegmata*, 76-93. Bousset argues that only short and striking sayings can be reconciled with the oral tradition from which they must have emerged.

⁵⁰ Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, 4.

⁵¹ Ibid. Gould elaborates his position in more detail in the following pages (Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, 5-25). Cf. Owen Chadwick, *Western Asceticism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), 33. Interestingly, while maintaining that the *Apophthegmata* constitutes this sort of “raw material”, a term which would seem to imply a degree of irregularity, Gould also attributes a surprising degree of unity to the text’s outlook. He has been criticized on this point, notably by Philip Rousseau, “Orthodoxy and the Coenobite,” *Studia Patristica* 30 (1997): 243, n. 11.

complexity of the manuscript situation and observations about the text's "concern ... to establish the identity of the community which it represents"⁵² would seem to preclude such a reading. Surely a text consciously engaged in identity-definition cannot be treated as reportage.⁵³ A similar position is taken by Douglas Burton-Christie in his well-known study of monastic uses of Scripture. While Burton-Christie admits that "the number and complexity of critical problems related to the *Sayings* is extraordinarily high,"⁵⁴ he constantly takes passages from the *Apophthegmata* as direct evidence of fourth-century Egypt, rather than as representing programmatic ideals for fifth-century Gaza.⁵⁵ William Harmless is likewise willing to attribute "remarkable accuracy" to the *Apophthegmata*'s preservation of the earliest Egyptian ascetics.⁵⁶

This level of confidence, expressed in much recent scholarship, is simply not warranted by the material. As we have already seen, there are major and insoluble problems in the manuscript and composition histories of the text. The text we have is from decades, even over a century, after the events described in the sayings, which were passed down orally, entering a new cultural context, and (in the case of the Systematic Collection) thematically edited. What is

⁵² Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, 17.

⁵³ The difficulty of this position was noted by reviewers at the time, and the success of more critical work in the decades following has done little to vindicate this strident position. Francine Cardman touches gently upon Gould's opposition to more critical approaches (Francine Cardman, Review of *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, by Graham Gould, *Church History*, vol. 66, no. 1 (1997), 87-8) and notes in her conclusion that "One may take exception to Gould's methodological assumptions" (Ibid, 88). Susan Ashbrook-Harvey is similarly skeptical, noting that "others may question" Gould's argument for the accuracy of the Sayings. She likewise points out that, in Gould's work, "There is no indication that some of the *Sayings* are simply standard hagiographic topoi found throughout late antique monastic literature" and notes that "Since no influences or interactions are considered, the *Sayings* come across as the product of a singular school of thought, *sui generis*: a community with no inheritance and a text without a context." (Susan Ashbrook-Harvey, Review of *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, by Graham Gould, *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 86 (1996), 242).

⁵⁴ Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 76.

⁵⁵ Again, a difficulty noted by the book's original reviewers. Sydney Griffith faults *The Word in the Desert* for taking the *Apophthegmata* and the *Life of Antony* as, together, comprising essentially all the evidence one needs in order to paint a fourth-century picture (Sydney Griffith, Review of *The Word in the Desert*, by Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 75, no. 1 (Jan. 1995), 114). Elizabeth Clark, meanwhile, feels as though "seasoned students of this material may think that the approach is *overly* sympathetic, lacking a critical edge." (Elizabeth Clark, "They Willed One Thing," review of *The Word in the Desert*, by Douglas Burton-Christie, *Crosscurrents*, vol. 43, no. 4 (Winter 1993/1994), 556).

⁵⁶ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 170-1.

more, the text does not claim to provide a reliable record of fourth-century events. Rather, it aims to preserve those stories from the great and holy elders that will be useful and instructive for the new generation.⁵⁷ It is a text engaged in formation, pedagogy, and spiritual direction, not in history. For studies of fourth century monasticism, the *Apophthegmata* is an unavoidable source, but it cannot be treated uncritically.

Running counter to this expression of confidence in the reliability of the *Apophthegmata* is a strand of more critical scholarship. This trend is grounded in a cautious approach to the text and a greater willingness to read against the grain. Noting the various difficulties involved in treating the Sayings as evidence of the fourth-century situation, scholars have turned towards new ways of reading them. Per Rönnegård argues for reading “them all simply as early monastic texts which have had a tremendous reception across geographical areas and over the centuries.”⁵⁸ Rubenson calls the form-critical methods employed by Bousset and widely followed since “methodologically unsound,” serving only to strengthen the (unjustified) “prejudice against the early monks as simple, uneducated peasants.”⁵⁹ Instead, he notes that studying the common features and principles that many of the Sayings hold in common “reveals more about the collections *per se*, and *their* historical background, than about the society in which the sayings originated.”⁶⁰ It is this outlook that has increasingly guided the study of the *Apophthegmata*, and that will be adopted in the present work. The Sayings are a source for fourth century monasticism, but a difficult one that must be used with extreme care, while employing many

⁵⁷ Larsen notes that the *chreia* form which the *Apophthegmata* take strengthens the concern in this regard: “By definition, the effectiveness of a *chreia* is measured not by its accuracy but by its ‘aptness.’ Its attribution and prompting circumstance are each eminently variable.” Larsen, “Pedagogical Parallels”, 109. To the extent that the Sayings are *chreiai*, they were judged by their value, not by the accuracy.

⁵⁸ Rönnegård, *Threads and Images*, 12.

⁵⁹ Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony*, 151.

⁶⁰ Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony*, 152.

references to contemporary sources, and with a great degree of humility. What we can learn from the *Apophthegmata* is where that community found itself by the late fifth and early sixth centuries. The values, practices, and self-image of the Palestinian monastic community that compiled the *Apophthegmata* (developed in continuity with their Egyptian origins, but not identical to them) should be clearly reflected in the Sayings.

Value of the Apophthegmata

Following upon the questions of what the Sayings tradition is and how it has been used, comes the question of why we should employ it here, for this project. The answer to this lies in what sort of text the *Apophthegmata* is, and also what it is not. Specifically, the *Apophthegmata* is (among other things) a pedagogical text, aimed not just at preserving the memory of the community's past, but, more urgently, at shaping the directions of the community's future. Further, it is not a theological or speculative text in anything like the normal meaning of those terms. These two factors combine to make it a valuable text for the sort of examination undertaken here.

Beginning with the negative side, if there is anything that the *Apophthegmata* most certainly is not, it is a dogmatic text. The Sayings show no interest in entering into the doctrinal debates of the fourth or fifth century. When the elders give a "word" to a questioner, they do not give instruction on Christian doctrine; they give practical advice about what should be done. Indeed, we might go further even than this. The *Apophthegmata* not only elects to avoid doctrinal discussions, but it also discourages the reader from getting involved either. A number of sayings single out theological arguments as an evil to avoid. At one point, Abba Sopatros advises a brother: "... do not inquire concerning the image. For this is not heresy, but private opinion and contentiousness on both sides. For it is not possible for any creature to comprehend

this matter.”⁶¹ Abba Copres, when dragged into a debate about Melchizedek, responds by striking himself in the face and saying, “Woe to you, Copres, for you left behind the things which God commanded you to do and sought after things which he does not require of you.”⁶²

This does not, of course, mean that the monks were latitudinarians. They certainly took orthodoxy seriously; they just did not consider it appropriate for someone pursuing the monastic life to debate about it. Even some of the passages that warn against excessive disputation contain within them warnings against heresy as well. For example, one elder says, “If someone speaks with you about any matter at all, do not contend with him. If he speaks well, say, ‘Yes.’ If badly, say, ‘You know what you are saying,’ and do not quarrel with him.”⁶³ Elsewhere, Abba Isaiah says, “Take care with all your ability to not contend about the faith nor to dogmatize, but follow the catholic church, for no one can comprehend anything of the Godhead.”⁶⁴ The monks cared deeply about their orthodoxy, in the sense of sharing the views of the church at large. But, at least as the *Apophthegmata* portrays the matter,⁶⁵ they felt that decisions about what constitutes orthodoxy were for others to make. Their work was to live well.

Because of this, the *Apophthegmata* contains only extremely limited information on Christian doctrine and debates about orthodoxy and heresy. For this reason, it has gone largely unexamined in studies of the relationship of Christianity and philosophy, given the heavy bias of

⁶¹ Systematic Collection, XIV.16. John Wortley is of the opinion that this admonition refers to the Christological controversy (cf. John Wortley, trans., *The Book of the Elders* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 237, n. 1). Guy, meanwhile, connects it to ascetic debates about anthropomorphism. Guy, *Les apophtegmes des pères: Collection systématique*, vol. 2, 265, n. 1.

⁶² Systematic Collection, XV.38.

⁶³ Systematic Collection, I.34.

⁶⁴ Systematic Collection, XV.27. Wortley translates “δογματίσαι” as “be dogmatic” (Wortley, *The Book of the Elders*, 254), a choice I cannot concur with. To “be dogmatic” in contemporary English parlance implies taking too strong a line on matters of orthodoxy, to be insufficiently flexible. The admonition here, however, is not to *dogmatize*, that is, not to discuss or debate about dogmas. The *Apophthegmata* takes dogma quite seriously.

⁶⁵ A portrayal that may have something to do with the fact that the *Apophthegmata* are compiled after the Origenist controversy, with all its ramifications in monastic circles.

such studies towards the role played by philosophy in the development and explication of Christian dogma. Here, a more conventional mode of analyzing a Patristic text's relationship to philosophy will simply not be available. If there is anything to be discovered, it will be in the realm of practice, not doctrine.

This brings us to the second feature of the *Apophthegmata*, the positive side of the coin. The Sayings are a pedagogical text. For the reader of the Systematic Collection, this fact emerges immediately. The compiler provides a brief prologue to the collection, and begins by stating quite plainly: "In this book are recorded the virtuous asceticism, the marvelous way of life, and the sayings of the holy and blessed fathers for imitation by and encouragement and instruction for those who desire to successfully practice the heavenly way of life and wish to travel along the road to the kingdom of heaven."⁶⁶ Those who passed down the Sayings through history did so in order "to stir those who come after to eager rivalry."⁶⁷ This tells us a great deal about the nature of the text, its intended audience, and its composition. While doctrinal formation may well have been part of the Desert program, especially for those monks who arrived with only a mediocre catechesis, the heart of Desert pedagogy is practice. More importantly still, it is aimed at those who are learning the life of the monk, people in need of models to imitate, although its contents could well be memorized and reflected upon throughout life.⁶⁸ It is not attempting to provide reportage on the events that took place in fourth century Scetis. Rather, while it does provide some information about the past, it is best read as a text aimed not at describing the past, but rather at shaping the future of the community from which it emerges. It achieves this goal by providing a tool for the formation of new members of that

⁶⁶ Systematic Collection, Prologue 1.

⁶⁷ Systematic Collection, Prologue 3.

⁶⁸ Cf. the discussion of meditation below in chapter 3.

community, members who will be the ones carrying on or deviating from the standards the compiler wishes to set.

For this reason, while we cannot read the *Apophthegmata* as an altogether reliable source on Egyptian monasticism in the fourth century, we *can* approach it as a trustworthy guide to the practices that were utilized and encouraged in fifth century Gaza (practices developed, of course, in continuity with the community's earlier Egyptian roots). When a practice is described favorably or commended directly to the reader, it is a fair assumption that a practice of that sort was taught and followed among the monks who assembled the *Apophthegmata*. This does not necessarily mean rote imitation, of course. Some sayings describe practices that were surely not standard fare, such as the story of a monk who exhumed a dead woman's corpse and soaked a rag in the fluids coming out of her decaying flesh in order to train himself through disgust not to lust after her.⁶⁹ Isolated stories of bizarre behavior along these lines were included not to be imitated directly, but to establish expectations and help form patterns of thinking. A monk who had read that story, for example, would not need to actually find a corpse himself. Recalling the story should be sufficient to invoke the right level of disgust at sin. What we are looking for in this dissertation are repeated descriptions of and exhortations to normative practices and indications of the thinking underlying those practices. Looking ahead to the main lines of inquiry we will follow going forward, when we see how the monks in the text governed the boundaries of their community (conversion), how they taught new members (formation), and what practices they followed throughout their lives (spiritual exercises), we should be able to discern what the community's actual expectations in these areas were. This will not necessarily mean that we know what they did prior to the text's compilation (although we would expect

⁶⁹ Systematic Collection, V.26.

parallels there as well), but it does tell us what their standards were, what they intended to have happen going forward, and what they were teaching their disciples to do.

Finally, if a more subjective note may be sounded, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* is worth studying here because it is worth studying everywhere. As is so often the case, no one has turned the phrase better than Peter Brown:

[The Desert Fathers] came to analyze the tensions among their fellow men with anxious attention. They spoke about these with an authority and an insight that make *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* the last and one of the greatest products of the Wisdom Literature of the ancient Near East.⁷⁰

The *Apophthegmata Patrum* is one of the most arresting, gripping, penetrating texts to emerge from Late Antiquity. It has fascinated generations of scholars as well as countless people, Christians and otherwise, who have sought their wisdom even to the present day. It has proved an inexhaustible resource, capable of being constantly revisited under widely divergent circumstances for radically varying purposes. It has held my attention fast ever since I first encountered it. There is no reason to expect that it will prove fruitless now.

The Systematic Collection

The reasons for using the *Apophthegmata* as a window into the ways in which Christian monastics drew upon the practical resources of their philosophical forebears should then be reasonably clear. There is a further point, in terms of the approach I have taken here, that merits some consideration. Throughout this dissertation, the focus is not upon the Sayings tradition as a whole, which would include the Alphabetical and Anonymous material, but rather upon the Systematic Collection alone. Per Rönnegård takes the same approach in his study of the Desert Fathers' use of Scripture.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 82.

⁷¹ Rönnegård, *Threads and Images*, 6.

A major reason for concentrating upon the Systematic Collection is a strictly practical calculation. Deep differences in the various collections of the *Apophthegmata* material are difficult to discern. Certainly some sayings appear in one collection and not another, leaving the possibility for something being lost when only one collection is used for a study. Even when the same sayings are included, small differences appear in the way in which the story is preserved in the different traditions. Finally, even when the saying in question is essentially identical across collections, the context surrounding each saying will be different, perhaps causing it to be read in a different way. Despite these concerns, it is not clear that there are any deep, programmatic divergences between the versions. They do not appear to have different views of the ascetic enterprise, either generally speaking or as regards specific practices. For this reason, it seems prudent to determine which one to use on the basis of where the best critical editions are available, and to this question, there can only be one answer. Jean-Claude Guy's masterful three-volume edition and French translation of the Systematic Collection, complete with an excellent introduction and many useful notes, has set the text of that Collection upon much firmer ground than we have for the Alphabetical or Anonymous material. In order to circumvent as much as possible any textual problems, I have throughout this dissertation relied upon Guy's work, and concentrated upon the Systematic Collection.⁷²

In addition to the practical matter of the best edition, there also exists a significant theoretical reason for employing the Systematic Collection. A key focus of this project is monastic pedagogy, including the practice of pedagogy itself, the conversion that leads into it,

⁷² Rönnegård adduces the same basic justification for his choice to focus on the Systematic Collection his study of the *Apophthegmata*'s use of the Bible: "For the purposes of the present study it is not necessary to consult all the different collections. The interest is in this general tradition, and in discovering ways in which the Bible is used there. Any one of the collections could have been consulted. A choice has been made to use the systematic collection. What speaks in favour of using *AP/GS* is above all the availability and legibility of a modern text-critical edition." Rönnegård, *Threads and Images*, 6.

and the practice of life that flows from it. It has been observed that, of the collections of *Apophthegmata*, the Systematic is the most suited to pedagogical purposes, the most self-consciously prepared for use in a teaching context.⁷³ This observation correlates well with the statements of the author of the prologue to the Systematic Collection as he explains why he took the trouble to reorganize the large amount of material involved. The editor complains of the “confused and disorganized” format of earlier collections, which caused “some difficulty in the mind of the reader, which was not able to impress upon its memory the meaning scattered all about in the book.”⁷⁴ It is for this reason that he chose to arrange the sayings topically, by chapters, a method “able to provide very clear comprehension and ready help to those who want it, for a word supported unanimously by many virtuous persons is no small encouragement to virtue.”⁷⁵ The chapters themselves are also laid out in a deliberate order, but in a way “very useful to the one who wishes to apply his mind.”⁷⁶ The compiler then explains how the topics of the chapters progress, following the spiritual journey step by step.⁷⁷ Insofar as the Systematic Collection is a more self-consciously pedagogical text, it suits our purposes best of any of the versions of the *Apophthegmata*.

“Desert” and “desert”

Before concluding this section, a brief terminological note is in order. In discussing the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, it is frequently necessary to make reference to the space within which the ascetic enterprise is undertaken. As is always the case for social spaces, especially when depicted in a developed spiritual and literary tradition that has had close to two centuries to

⁷³ Guy, *Les apophtegmes des pères: Collection systématique*, vol. 1, 29-32.

⁷⁴ Systematic Collection, Prologue 4.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Systematic Collection, Prologue 7.

⁷⁷ Systematic Collection, Prologue 8-10.

formulate its terminology and concepts, there are both physical and ideological components involved. In order to maintain clarity, I have found it useful to distinguish the physical, geographical space from the constructed ideological or spiritual space throughout the text of this study. Whenever the lower-case “desert” is used, the reader should understand a reference to the land that lies beyond the Nile flood-plain, characterized by heat, sand, a lack of water, and a general inhospitality towards human settlement. By contrast, the upper-case “Desert” refers to the spiritual space inhabited by the abbas and ammas described in the Sayings tradition, along with their disciples and occasional visitors. This space is characterized by silence (exterior, but also and especially interior), solitude, clarity in the moral struggle, and opportunities for prayer, introspection, and asceticism. While these two spaces typically overlap, they remain conceptually distinct. It is quite possible to find the inner Desert while far from the physical desert. As Amma Syncletica teaches, “There are many in the mountain doing the works of city-dwellers who are perishing, and there are many in cities doing the works of the Desert who are being saved. For it is possible to be alone in one’s mind in the midst of many, and to have one’s thought in the midst of the crowd while alone.”⁷⁸ This inner, spiritual Desert has proved to be remarkably transferable in subsequent history. For example, the Russian word “Poustinia” is the ordinary word for “desert”, but likewise refers to a particular kind of solitary spiritual retreat within the Russian Orthodox tradition.⁷⁹ Because of the importance of this distinction and the enduring power of the concept of the inner Desert, it is useful to maintain the distinction throughout this dissertation.

⁷⁸ Systematic Collection, II.27.

⁷⁹ Catherine Doherty, *Poustinia: Encountering God in Silence, Solitude, and Prayer* (Combermere: Madonna House Publications, 2000), 14.

The Philosophical Sources

Evidence for the pedagogical methods and spiritual practices of Late Antique philosophical communities is difficult to come by, and so a word on the sources used in this dissertation is in order. To a large extent, studies of philosophical practice must rely upon the evidence of the biographies (one might dare to call them hagiographies⁸⁰) of the great figures in the philosophical tradition. While these documents certainly bear the marks of personal, cultural, and political concerns, there is good reason to hope that some real evidence might emerge from them nonetheless. As Robert Lamberton has judged in the case of the *Life of Plotinus*, we have, thanks to Porphyry's careful attention to his source and his personal acquaintance with his subject, "a unique document, arguably the most reliable account of an ancient philosopher to come down to us from his own time".⁸¹ John Dillon has reached a similar conclusion regarding the value of Porphyry's account of Plotinus' school on the basis of the fact that Porphyry had no difficulty in pointing out certain ways in which Plotinus was eccentric, but notes no particular eccentricity in his teaching. For this reason, conclusions drawn from the *Life of Plotinus* can be taken to have broad validity for Platonist schools of the time.⁸² Lamberton also devotes substantial attention to Marinus' *Life of Proclus* and Damascius' *Philosophical History* (frequently referred to by its alternate name, the *Life of Isidore*). A certain level of dependence upon sources of this sort is unavoidable, as one will search in vain for anything resembling

⁸⁰ See for example the provocative but defensible title of Mark Edwards translation of two important contributions to this genre: Mark Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints: The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by their Students* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000). The profound religiosity of the ancient philosophical schools will be examined in the chapter on conversion.

⁸¹ Robert Lamberton, "The Schools of Platonic Philosophy of the Roman Empire," in *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, ed. Yun Lee Too. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 434.

⁸² John Dillon, "The Academy in the Middle Platonic Period," in *The Golden Chain: Studies in the Development of Platonism and Christianity*, ed. John Dillon. (Variorum: Hampshire, 1990), 71.

details of pedagogical or spiritual practice in treatises on metaphysics, while *vitae* inevitably touch upon such matters.

To the three sources already mentioned (Porphyry, Marinus, and Damascius), other texts from the biographical tradition, such as the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, will be added.

Alongside these biographies, two major anthologies will also play a prominent role in this chapter.⁸³ Eunapius of Sardis' *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* is essential, particularly given the fourth century setting of many of the stories in the *Apophthegmata*. Eunapius fills in important gaps between the narratives of Porphyry and Marinus, providing a number of stories about Iamblichus, a figure critical to the development of later Platonism. Likewise, Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* records centuries-long traditions across a number of philosophical schools, with stories from scores of different figures. These sources combine to furnish a great deal of text, from which a few central strands emerge.

But a cautionary word is still in order. Despite his positive evaluation of the reliability of the *Life of Plotinus* for the study of Platonist schools in Late Antiquity, Dillon concludes on a sobering note: "But our final admission on all these questions must be, I fear, that we are miserably ill-informed."⁸⁴ Glum though it may be, it is an essential point. Beyond the usual caveats regarding the agendas of authors, their distance from the source material (especially in the case of Diogenes Laertius), and so on, two difficulties in particular confront us in the biographical material here. First, community practices are always and necessarily concrete, local, and particular. This body of literature, however, contains material from disparate times, places, and schools of thought (although in this last category, Platonism does predominate). It is

⁸³ Given the wide variety of philosophers discussed, Damascius' *Philosophical History* may well be better categorized alongside these anthologies than the single-subject biographies.

⁸⁴ Dillon, "The Academy in the Middle Platonic Period", 77.

a challenging and dubious matter to work Damascius and Apollonius of Tyana into some coherent whole. Second, the subject of this dissertation was emphatically not the point of most interest to the authors of these philosophical biographies; they were not intending to offer a comprehensive theory or account of the practices of their communities. This can be detected, for example, in the absence of much beyond a passing mention of mathematics in these accounts, despite the fact that we know that math was an important subject for study.⁸⁵

Despite these difficulties, we must work with the evidence that is available, and the biographical sources are a major portion of what is left to us. Moreover, while the ancient world was full of substantial (and often under-estimated) transformations, it was also capable of remarkable continuities, especially in the realm of education. Despite local variations and developments over time, the major philosophical schools were able to maintain many of their core philosophical convictions for centuries. It is certainly plausible, then, that they maintained core elements of their pedagogy over time, along with the practices that pedagogy was intended to inculcate, and this does indeed appear to have happened. Fully cognizant of the impossibility of extrapolating the totality of philosophical methods of formation and practice, we will instead look for core elements that endured over time, and across school boundaries. It is this core that provides the best picture of what was truly distinctive about philosophical formation in Late Antiquity – the personal nature of teaching, the therapeutic orientation, the sensitivity to the particular case, and so on. Likewise, core spiritual exercises persist across centuries and, in differing forms, across school lines. It is these features that must be examined in order to see how and to what extent the Desert Fathers were drawing upon their philosophical forebears.

⁸⁵ Lamberton, “The Schools of Platonic Philosophy of the Roman Empire,” 435. See especially footnote 6 on the same page for further detail.

The commonalities and continuities maintained across centuries necessitate a brief excursus on the use of the terms “Platonism” and “Neoplatonism” within this dissertation. Certainly the philosophical tradition initiated in the fourth century BC by the disciple of Socrates underwent significant transformations as it developed over time and moved into new cultures and locales. Scholars have often underscored these transformations by using the terms “Middle Platonism” and “Neoplatonism” to distinguish later developments from earlier sources. While I will often apply these terms (especially, given the sources involved, “Neoplatonism”), I also freely use the term “Platonism” to describe philosophers who trace their intellectual lineage to Plato, regardless of what time period they lived in or what doctrinal specifics they adhered to. Thus Plato, Plotinus, Iamblichus, Pophyry, Damascius, and others all may appear as “Platonists” in my nomenclature, which has the value of describing the philosophers in question in language they would themselves have recognized. While there is no doubt that they transformed Plato’s heritage, they saw themselves as faithful stewards of the Golden Chain. Additionally, despite these transformations, key elements of the Platonist school persisted over the centuries. One might think, for example, of the five “antis” that Lloyd Gerson identifies as the constitutive elements of “Ur-Platonism” (the underlying intellectual commitments that precede a positive Platonic metaphysics): “antimaterialism, antimechanism, antinominalism, antirelativism, and antiskepticism.”⁸⁶ Substantial positive elements of continuity exist as well, such as the tracing of the origins of reality to the One or the Good, an ultimate source of being that transcends all particular being. As much of this project draws and depends upon substantive continuities, both within and across the philosophical schools, and between philosophy and early Christianity, the use of “Platonism” to emphasize these continuities seems reasonable.

⁸⁶ Lloyd Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 10.

The biographical evidence, however, is not the only evidence available. A variety of treatises, letters, etc. also appear and illuminate the question of how the philosophical communities formed their disciples and the life into which they were initiated. Where Platonism is prominent in the biographical evidence,⁸⁷ Epicureanism takes an out-sized place in the rest of the sources. Given the fact that Epicureanism no longer existed as a major school of thought in the fourth century, as well as the distance between Christianity and the philosophical hedonism of Epicureanism, a little apologia must be offered for including so much material from this tradition.⁸⁸

To begin, we may observe that, while Epicureanism was no longer a major philosophical option by the end of Late Antiquity, this does not mean that it was entirely a spent force. We know that Epicureanism did maintain influence well into the imperial period. Diogenes of Oinoanda's inscription demonstrates this much, at least.⁸⁹ While the philosophy of the Garden died out in time and was often spoken of in tones of contempt,⁹⁰ it was not wholly forgotten. In fact, a number of elements of Epicurean thought made their way into later Stoic thought, as well as into the synthesis of Neoplatonism. While Epicurean materialist physics and metaphysics were totally incompatible with other approaches, especially Platonism, a number of their arguments could be adopted. Michael Erler points to Epicurean perspectives on the creation of the world and Seneca's appropriation of Epicurean principles as some examples of an ongoing

⁸⁷ A fact that I do not find troublesome, as by the time of the Desert Fathers, and certainly by the time of the composition of the *Apophthegmata*, Platonism was the dominant philosophy in the Empire, and thus would be the primary philosophical conversation partner for the monks.

⁸⁸ While Stoicism is also prominent in certain portions of this study, Stoic survivals in the Neoplatonic synthesis and connections with Christianity are more obvious than Epicurean ones. Additionally, the Stoic commitment to moral virtue above all corresponds much more naturally with Christian ideals. For these reasons, it seems less necessary to detail the reasons for using Stoic evidence at length.

⁸⁹ Michael Erler, "Epicureanism in the Roman Empire", in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. James Warren. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 58-9.

⁹⁰ Most famously, Plotinus' identification of the Epicureans with birds too heavy to fly. Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.9.1.

life for aspects of Epicurean thinking.⁹¹ Seneca had a serious grasp of Epicurus' writings, and in his letters cites Epicurus and Lucretius more often than any other philosophers.⁹² While rejecting Epicurus' hedonism, political indifference, and irreligion, Seneca shows great respect for the practical ethics that emerged from Epicurus' thought.⁹³ Even confirmed Neoplatonists such as Porphyry and Marinus turned to Epicurean wisdom, although they do not name its source directly. Porphyry, in his *Letter to Marcella*, addresses himself primarily to questions of moral virtue, rather than speculative philosophy. In this regard, he cites Epicurus almost verbatim when he says, "Empty is the discourse of that philosopher by which no human suffering is treated. For just as there is no benefit from medicine if it does not treat the diseases of bodies, neither is there from philosophy if it does not cast out suffering from the soul."⁹⁴ Marinus of Neapolis makes a similar move, rebranding the famous anti-political Epicurean dictum of "*lathe biōsas*" ("live unknown") as Pythagorean wisdom.⁹⁵ Erler points to a number of other places at which Neoplatonists used Epicurean arguments and principles, especially their practical ethics and manner of life, this last move shared by Alexandrian Christian theologians as well.⁹⁶ Christians also found Epicureans to be valuable allies in attacking pagan cult and religious superstition. Both groups were, after all, commonly derided as atheists, and so, while they took their "atheism" in different directions, there was a common interest in undermining popular and imperial pagan religion.

⁹¹ Erler, "Epicureanism in the Roman Empire", 47.

⁹² Erler, "Epicureanism in the Roman Empire", 49.

⁹³ Erler, "Epicureanism in the Roman Empire", 50.

⁹⁴ Porphyry, *Letter to Marcella*, 31.

⁹⁵ Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, 15, Epicurus, Usener Fragment 551. This dictum was seen in a negative light by Plutarch, but is also cited with approval (and as Pythagorean) by Philostratus. Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints*, 80, n. 157. The pressure of Christian imperial anti-pagan policy surely played a role in the appeal of this principle to Marinus.

⁹⁶ Erler, "Epicureanism in the Roman Empire", 59-61.

For these reasons, then, this study will draw upon a substantial amount of Epicurean evidence regarding matters of practical ethics, namely how initiates were brought into the philosophical life, how that life was inculcated in new practitioners, and the spiritual practices through which that life took concrete form for both beginners and adepts. While the monks may not have directly engaged with the Epicurean authors and texts referenced here, the ideas could easily have been mediated to the monks by Stoic, Platonist, or even Alexandrian Christian sources. Therefore, while Epicurus and Philodemus may not be direct sources for monastic methodology, the evidence that can be gleaned from their works remains relevant. Given the long history of Christian appropriation of philosophical thought, including psychagogical method,⁹⁷ it follows logically that monastics would make use of practical ethics from various schools, fitting philosophical models into ascetic contexts.

Three Areas of Inquiry

The project ahead involves tracing the philosophical life in its Greek and Christian forms through three stages. We will begin at the beginning, with the conversion of the new disciple to the philosophical or the monastic life, exploring how new monks and philosophers enter their new communities. The new members then need to be taught the way of life that defines the philosophical or monastic community they wish to enter. To achieve this, a process of formation is necessary. Finally, the disciple needs to live out his or her commitments from day to day. To achieve this, certain spiritual exercises are prescribed and continually practiced throughout the life of the philosopher or monk. What follows is a brief overview of these three areas of inquiry.

⁹⁷ See for example Clarence Glad, *Paul and Philodemus: Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychagogy* (Leiden: Brill, 1995) or Benjamin Fiore, "The Pastoral Epistles in the Light of Philodemus' 'On Frank Criticism,'" in *Philodemus and the New Testament World*, ed. John T. Fitzgerald, et al Holland, (Leiden: Brill, 2004). 274.

Conversion

Except under extraordinary circumstances, no one is born into the life of a philosopher or a monk. Entering either path in life requires a conscious decision, typically made in early adulthood (though it could be made later in life as well). For this reason, it proves useful to analyze the beginnings of philosophy and monasticism under the framework of the sociological concept of conversion. The first chapter begins with a consideration of the different approaches to understanding this phenomenon that have been proposed over the course of the last century. There is no avoiding Arthur Darby Nock's classic study, but a great many developments have taken place since its publication in 1933 that have substantially problematized the picture. John Lofland and Rodney Stark revolutionized the field by introducing the importance of social networks to the study of conversion, and many other scholars have contributed to developing a more nuanced picture.

Following a defense of the appropriateness of an apparently religious concept like "conversion" for the study of philosophy (as ancient philosophy was intrinsically religious, there is no difficulty), the chapter moves on to identify three chief characteristics of monastic and philosophical conversion. The first is the concept of the "bright line", a definitive turn from an old identity to a new one. Second, crossing the bright line brought with it for both communities a certain element of withdrawal. Finally, the necessity of the teaching relationship is considered, a point that looks ahead to the second chapter, but is nevertheless proper to the discussion of conversion.

Formation

Given the necessity of the teaching relationship that followed on conversion, the second chapter must examine the characteristics and methods employed within that relationship. The

chapter begins with the characteristics of the relationship, and then turns to the methodology employed by the teacher in forming the disciple. In addition to the fact that learning a new way of life from a teacher (as opposed to solely using written sources and/or one's private intuitions) was strictly mandatory, as discussed in chapter one, two major characteristics of the teacher/student connection emerge. First, the teacher always maintained a therapeutic orientation towards the student. Throughout this chapter, but especially here (and in the discussion of case sensitivity) the work of Martha Nussbaum is prominent. Not entirely unlike Hadot, Nussbaum sees the heart of ancient philosophy not so much in its speculative content as in its ability to treat human ills. Where medicine treats the body, philosophy treats the soul, a truism adhered to by all ancient philosophical schools, despite widely-varying prescriptions. The Desert in this respect turns out to have profound parallels with the school. The Sayings tradition does not occupy itself with doctrinal disputes, but rather concentrates upon the salvation of souls. The second parallel characteristic of the two teaching traditions is the personal nature of the master/disciple relationship. In both cases, teachers were not just representatives of an institution, as in a modern university, but were personally familiar with their students, sharing not only a classroom, but often a table, a hearth, and perhaps even a dwelling.

In addition to these two characteristics, three methodological similarities come in for analysis as well, and again the work of Nussbaum is important. The first is the unsparing frank speech that the teacher must employ. Just as a doctor cannot hesitate to discuss unpleasant or embarrassing symptoms of physical disease, the therapeutic teacher cannot shy away from exposing and critiquing the student's errors, even if such criticism may initially provoke anger or shame in the hearer. Closely connected to frank speech is an attitude of radical openness, whereby the disciple confesses his secret deeds and thoughts. These two elements lead into the

final, and most vital, aspect of the methodology involved here: case sensitivity. The difficulties faced by each person are always unique to that person, and therefore the methods for treating them must be carefully tailored.

Spiritual Exercises

Pedagogy always comes to an end, as the student must in turn become a master. It is necessary, however, for the one who has progressed beyond the level of regular instruction from a teacher to have some practices in hand in order to persist in the commitments made at conversion and shaped during formation. To discover these practices, we turn to the “spiritual exercises” identified by Pierre Hadot. The chapter begins by considering Hadot’s concept and responses to it, including Foucault’s *technologies of the self*, Nussbaum’s work on philosophical therapy, and John Cooper’s rejection of the entire category. After noting the varying levels of success these scholars have had in working with Hadot’s concepts, the chapter proceeds to analyze four spiritual exercises that appear in the major philosophical schools (i.e. at least in Platonism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism; frequently in others as well) and among the Desert Fathers. What emerges is a system of exercises in which three primary-level exercises give rise to a fourth, an attitude which governs the entire life of the practitioner.

The three primary-level exercises examined are meditation, contemplation of death, and examination of conscience. Both monks and philosophers read, memorized, and recited to themselves pithy formulae of the basic principles of their beliefs. By doing so, they sought to fix these principles more firmly in their minds and inspire right responses when confronted with challenging situations. They also regularly reflected upon death, not out of morbidity, but out of a desire to reframe their understanding of the present life. Finally, a daily practice of self-examination was encouraged across the board. These three all serve as the foundation for the

practice of vigilance, an attitude of focused attention upon the present moment, including its moral and spiritual implications. By developing an attitude of vigilance, it becomes possible for someone pursuing the philosophical life to live it fully at all times. In this way, the concept of vigilance brings us to the summit of philosophy in both the schools and the Desert.

CHAPTER ONE: CONVERSION

Introduction: The Concept of Conversion

While the pedagogical relationship is central to this dissertation and in some ways serves as its focal point, it is not possible to begin with a study of teaching in and of itself. Rather, it is necessary to begin by addressing the question of how a person would come to find himself setting out upon the monastic or philosophical path, thereby entering into such a relationship. One is not, or at least not ordinarily, born into either of these ways of life.¹ Rather, for the great majority, entry onto either of these paths came about by means of a deliberate, conscious decision made at a mature age. For this reason, it is proper in both contexts to speak of a “conversion” to the philosophical or monastic life, and the dynamics of this conversion must be understood before attempting any analysis of the pedagogy or spiritual practice that follows. We begin, then, at the beginning, in quite a literal sense.

This choice of terminology immediately raises as many questions as it answers. First and foremost, what exactly is meant by the concept of “conversion”? To answer this question, there is no way around beginning with A. D. Nock’s old, but classic and influential study of conversion in the ancient world. Nock defines conversion in the following terms: “By conversion we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.”² For Nock, then, conversion takes on a strongly dualistic, binary nature. One is at one point a pagan full of false

¹ There are some references to children raised among the monks from their youth, but these are rare and certainly exceptional. See below, page 61, note 80.

² A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 7.

beliefs, and at another a Christian full of true ones, or at one point an unreflective member of the *hoi polloi*, and at another a philosopher with justified, rational beliefs about the world.

While not without its virtues, this sharp binary distinction has proved too rigid for most scholars to accept unmodified. Philip Rousseau has gone so far as to declare Nock “definitively dethroned,” a judgment that is difficult to disagree with.³ A key element of critiques of a binary approach to conversion has been to emphasize the role of process over decisive moment. As Susanna Elm has explained:

Contrary to “modern” notions of conversion which are frequently shaped by a narrow concept of it as a “flash of illumination” signaling the moment of intense personal rejection of a previously held belief in favor of another one (or at least the narrative representation of such an intense personal experience), many ancient authors told a very different story when describing a shift in religious affiliation.⁴

Instead of emphasizing a radical moment of transition from one set of religious commitments to another it is better to envision a process by which an individual moves step by step away from one context and towards another, a process with a number of potential ambiguities along the way. This process is not uniform by any means. Paul Dilley identifies three different types of conversion in the monastic literature: conversions in response to a “divine calling”, those brought about by what he calls “mediated persuasion” (i.e. conversions brought about by a human intermediary, through an encounter with scripture, etc.), and those that come under “divine compulsion” (i.e. some kind of salutary dramatic, or even traumatic, interference from God).⁵

³ Rousseau, “Review: Conversion: A Social Process”, review of *Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Seeing and Believing*, by Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton, *The Classical Review*, vol. 55, no. 1., Mar. 2005, 292.

⁴ Susanna Elm, “Inscriptions and Conversions: Gregory of Nazianzus on Baptism (*Or.* 38-40),” in *Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Seeing and Believing*, ed. Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton. (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 1. See also *Ibid.*, 7, where Elm directly challenges Nock’s definition cited above, pointing out the extent to which it is indebted to modern historiography, as opposed to ancient sources.

⁵ Paul Chandler Dilley, “Care of the Other in Ancient Monasticism: A Cultural History of Ascetic Guidance” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2008), 32-33, 34-36, 37-9, respectively.

Just as the way in could vary substantially from case to case, so too could what happens after someone has entered a new path. Indeed, this variability is identified by Neil McLynn as one of the few constant factors in Christian conversions across the centuries: “Converts (or those effecting conversions) retain their room for maneuver: there is no monolithic ‘church’ (still less a monolithic Christian state) able to dictate to its new members the exact terms of their faith. Conversion continued to mean different things to different converts.”⁶ One could make similar claims in regards to philosophical and monastic conversions. In the last analysis, the leaders of these communities could use persuasion along with social and psychological pressures to encourage new philosophers or monks to behave in the ways they felt proper. They could do little, however, to prevent the monastic and philosophical lives from taking on quite different shapes for different practitioners.

Responding to the need to develop more sensitive concepts of conversion, aware of the ambiguity and fluidity of each particular situation, contemporary scholarship has often attempted to formulate new definitions of conversion. While numerous scholars have attempted better, more modern, or more precise definitions of conversion, none have gained anything like broad acceptance. On the contrary, it has become something of a commonplace in conversion scholarship to note the difficulty, and perhaps even the impossibility of defining conversion.⁷

⁶ Neil McLynn, “Seeing and Believing: Aspects of Conversion from Antoninus Pius to Louis the Pious,” in *Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Seeing and Believing*, ed. Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton. (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 225.

⁷ Cf. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9-10, in which they note the difficulty of defining conversion in general as well as the specific difficulty of developing a definition that is universally satisfactory across all religions. Peter G. Stromberg, “The Role of Language in Religious Conversion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 117-8 likewise comes to the conclusion that there is at present no satisfactory definition of conversion in the literature.

This has led a number of scholars to turn away from straightforward definitions entirely,⁸ or to adopt deliberately minimalist positions in order to avoid the pitfalls of excessive precision. It is this minimalist approach that has arguably produced the most acceptable results. Robert Montgomery's definition of conversion as simply "the acquiring of a religious identity not previously held" is at the very least difficult to find fault with.⁹ The minimalist approach retains the necessary flexibility for dealing with the wide range of phenomena that can reasonably be described as "conversion", and it emphasizes the concept of a change of "identity", which is undoubtedly at the heart of religious conversion. At the same time, a definition like Montgomery's also does not offer much insight into the subject. In the end, the quest for a precise definition of conversion has been, at least to this point, unsuccessful, and perhaps unnecessary. For the purposes of this study, no one set definition is necessary. Rather, we will explore the question from several angles and let the portrait that emerges stand on its own merits.

Despite these complications and caveats, one element of Nock's definition has retained something of its force. For all the emphasis on continuity and process that has come to characterize modern conversion studies, an irreducible element of change, of what Nock called the old and new, remains essential to conversion. While this change requires time and process, while it looks different depending upon the unique circumstances and individuals involved in any given case, and while the results may vary substantially, there is nevertheless a real transition from one way of life to another. There is what Dilley aptly terms "a concern for

⁸ Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 18 eschews the idea of a "monocausal" approach to conversion, preferring to remain open to as wide a variety of factors as possible. Cf. also *ibid*, 37, 41.

⁹ Montgomery, "Conversion and the Historic Spread of Religions," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 165.

establishing a stable new identity.”¹⁰ That is to say that, when someone in sincerity decides to be baptized, for example, they view themselves in a new way (though not always the way the bishop says they should), they adopt new personal and social goals, and they act differently than they did before.

In the context of philosophers and monks, this takes on a unique shape in light of the fact that philosophical and monastic conversion do not necessarily entail adopting a completely new religious outlook or joining a new community.¹¹ Rather, these conversions represent a move to a particular, elite spiritual path within a broader religious context. Apart from Epicureanism’s rejection of the gods and of *paideia* broadly speaking, ancient philosophy in general adopted a favorable assessment of pagan culture, despite having a distinct interpretation of certain elements of that culture. Philosophy was one option, elite in multiple senses, within the overall framework of Hellenism, especially of cultivated *paideia*. To become a philosopher did not automatically imply rejection of the myths, of the imperial cult, or other elements of pagan life; it could just mean seeing them in new ways. As we shall see in more detail presently, this was especially true in the context of Iamblichan theurgy. Similarly, adopting a monastic vocation did not entail a rejection of any element of Christianity at large. Certainly there could be tensions between the monks and the bishops, and priorities would vary between contexts. However, the monks were also careful to insist that their monastic life did not make them necessarily better than ordinary Christians.¹² Monasticism was a particularly intense and dedicated way for a Christian to live

¹⁰ Dilley, “Care of the Other in Ancient Monasticism”, 22. Susanna Elm uses a similar expression, emphasizing that, in conversion, the believer finds “the possibility of salvation through continuous adherence to a new ‘religious’ vision.” Elm, “Inscriptions and Conversions”, 1.

¹¹ It certainly *could* be the case that a conversion to Christianity might coincide with a conversion to monasticism, or that a decision to return to the old gods might coincide with a philosophical approach to life. This was not necessary, however, or even normative.

¹² Amma Syncletica, for example, says, “There are many in the mountain doing the works of city-dwellers who are perishing, and there are many in cities doing the works of the Desert who are being saved. For it is possible to be alone in one’s mind in the midst of many, and to have one’s thought in the midst of the crowd while alone.”

out the universal mission of purifying the soul and attaining salvation in Christ. In both cases, then, the conversion is within a religious tradition, moving from a lower to a higher level of commitment, rather than from one religious tradition to another.¹³ Despite this fact, they can both be appropriately termed conversions, as the entrance upon either of these paths marked, for practitioners, the basic dividing line of their lives.

The Intrinsic Religiosity of Philosophy

Before moving on from the idea of conversion as a category for understanding the beginnings of the philosophical and monastic life, one concern with this approach deserves to be addressed. The word “conversion” in contemporary discourse tends to be closely bound up with the concept of *religious* conversion. Any other transition (from one school of thought to another, from one cultural identity to another, etc.) is generally spoken of as a “conversion” only by analogy with changes in religious identity. While this presents no difficulty for monasticism, speaking of philosophy, which is sometimes presented as the cultivation of reason as opposed to superstition in the ancient world, in terms of “conversion” may raise concerns about importing too many religious connotations and parallels, connections that may not be contextually appropriate. Perhaps conforming philosophy to a conversion narrative artificially forces it into a religious context, thereby finding apparent parallels to the monastic world which are actually derived from the concept of conversion itself, and not from any genuine aspect of philosophical life. The concern here is reasonable, but it can be answered by showing that ancient philosophy

Systematic Collection, II.27. Similarly, it is said that “This was once revealed to Abba Antony in the Desert: ‘In the city there is someone similar to you, a doctor by trade, who gives his surplus to those in need, and all day he sings the Trisagion with the angels of God.’” Systematic Collection, XVIII.1. Systematic Collection XX.21, 22, and 23 present similar portraits of virtuous laypeople in the world.

¹³ A monastic conversion could, of course, coincide with a religious conversion to Christianity, and there are some examples of this. In such a case, however, the two conversions can still be conceptually distinguished, and there is no reason to presume that someone taking this approach to conversion would think that someone who converted to Christianity, but not to monasticism, had done anything illegitimate.

was an intrinsically religious enterprise, especially by the time of its encounter with monasticism in the fourth and fifth centuries. Ancient philosophy is deeply marked by religious concerns, by beliefs in and about God and the gods, and by efforts to understand and bring about the proper relationships between humanity and divinity. From its earliest pre-Socratic roots, to Socrates and Plato, to its final waning after Damascius and the closing of the Academy, pagan philosophy was inextricably tied to its unique approach to religion.

This deep connection to religiosity is present already at the foundation of philosophy, the question of being. The questions “what is being?” and “why are there beings, rather than nothing?” are fundamental to the entire Greek philosophical tradition, and indeed to the Western tradition generally speaking. From the outset, we find that this question is couched in religious terms. Parmenides, in his philosophical poem *On Nature*, which represents one of the earliest philosophically significant approaches to these issues, presents itself as an address by a goddess, a revelation from the divine world.¹⁴ The concept of divine forces offering guidance to philosophical exploration finds its most famous expression in Socrates’ *daimonion*, a divine power which warns him away from wrong actions.¹⁵ Likewise, Plato locates the beginning of Socrates’ entire philosophical quest in a mysterious response delivered by the Oracle at Delphi.¹⁶ Plato continued and extended the religiosity of philosophy with his own speculations on the source of all being, proposing the Form of the Good as the first principle, “beyond being”, upon which all else depends for its very existence.¹⁷ The soul is likened to the divine,¹⁸ and the myth of the soul’s chariot ride in the *Phaedrus* likewise is explicitly presented as a journey to the

¹⁴ Parmenides, *On Nature*, 22-32. Cf. Eric Perl, *Thinking Being: Introduction to Metaphysics in the Classical Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 12-3.

¹⁵ Plato, *Apology* 31c-d, 40a.

¹⁶ Plato, *Apology*, 20e-23c.

¹⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, 509b.

¹⁸ Plato, *Phaedo*, 80a.

heavens, replete with gods and divine forms.¹⁹ Aristotle does not depart from this tradition either, freely referring to his first principle, the unmoved mover or thought thinking itself, as “God” (*theos*),²⁰ and affirming “all things by nature have something divine.”²¹ At their very roots, the Platonic and Aristotelian schools both carry profoundly religious concepts.

Stoicism diverged from the Platonic and Aristotelian approaches to metaphysics, but in no way departed from the tradition of expressing their metaphysical convictions in terms derived from religious life. The Stoics also believed in a cosmic deity, although in a different sense from Platonism. The Stoic God cannot be understood as a transcendent being, separate from nature, beyond being, or anything of the sort. Rather, their God is immanent in the cosmos, which was itself a rational, living being.²² Within this framework, the Stoic God functions analogously to how a soul governs a body, and it was at least the majority position within Stoicism that this God was a conscious force.²³ As we have seen, they also maintained a robust, if at times troubled, relationship with the traditional gods, and might express serious metaphysical convictions in terms drawn from popular religious language, Cleanthes’ *Hymn to Zeus* being the *locus classicus*. Even the Epicureans, so often perceived as atheists, did in fact believe in the existence of the gods (although these were purely material beings, in accordance with their materialist metaphysics). Their supposed atheism lay not in the denial of the *existence* of the gods, but rather of their *relevance* to human life. The gods, for Epicurus, were in a state of total and perpetual blessedness, and thus had no reason to become involved in any affairs pertaining to the changeable, temporal order.²⁴

¹⁹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246a-54e.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Λ.7, 1072b.

²¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Z.7, 1153b.

²² John Sellars, *Stoicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 93.

²³ Sellars, *Stoicism*, 93-5.

²⁴ Cf. Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 123-4.

It might be objected that this language is no more than imagery, a convenient means of expressing rational, philosophical ideas to a society still marked at every level, from the personal to the political, by pagan myth and cult. Many of the philosophical schools sought to distance themselves from popular religion (and popular society at large), as we will see below in regards to philosophical withdrawal. Yet it is necessary to consider the notion that the religiosity that permeates ancient philosophy was genuine, and reflected some real and important element of the philosophical view of the world. The contemporary philosopher Eric Perl has offered one proposal along these lines:

Metaphysics as the thinking of being is intrinsically religious. Thales, the very first Greek philosopher reputed to have attempted an account of the whole, is said to have declared, ‘All things are full of Gods’ (Aristotle, *De An.* A.5, 411a7), a leitmotif that is repeated in various forms throughout the metaphysical tradition. Plato quotes it with approval (*Laws* 899b9); Aristotle remarks that ‘all things by nature have something divine in them’ (*Eth. Nic.* Z.7, 1153b33); Plotinus says of the One, or God, that ‘not being anywhere, there is nowhere he is not’ (V.5.8.24-5) ... That metaphysics leads to divinity is not an accident of history but is intrinsic to the very enterprise of metaphysics.²⁵

While much post-Enlightenment philosophy has gone in a different direction vis-à-vis metaphysics and divinity, in the ancient world, reflection upon being itself, the whole, the all, and (in the Platonic tradition) the beyond-being that undergirds all that is, awoke a genuine and profound religious awe. This awe found expression in the language of God, gods, *daimones*, divinity, the heavens, and more that characterizes the philosophical schools.

The strength of the religious strain in philosophy can be felt the more strongly when we realize that it was not only applied to the cosmos, but also to the philosophical plan of self-transformation. Across the various schools, although it was instantiated in different ways, Dominic O’Meara has identified a common concern for divinization (*theōsis*), the transformation

²⁵ Perl, *Thinking Being*, 3.

of the human into the divine.²⁶ While the term divinization is of Christian origin, the concept, defined by Pseudo-Dionysius as “assimilation and union to God, as far as possible,”²⁷ has significant roots in ancient philosophy (Dionysius’ wording is drawn from Plato).²⁸ For Aristotle, the best life for a human is the life of contemplation, which, as the life lived by the gods and the unmoved mover, is a divine life.²⁹ He insists that man ought to “as far as possible, be immortal, and do all things so as to live according to the highest within himself.”³⁰

Approaching the matter from a different perspective, Epicurus likewise advocated the idea of making oneself like a god, so far as possible. As he says, the genuine Epicurean “will live as a god among men.”³¹ The Epicurean community is later presented as being comprised of those who “rejoice like the gods.”³² While the theme of the divine life is less prominent in Stoicism, O’Meara nevertheless observes that, “in Stoicism, if the best life for humans is a life according to nature, according, that is, to human nature and to the nature of the universe, then this means living the life of the divine *logos* in man, that is reason, in conformity with a universe determined by a cosmic divine *logos*.”³³ Lastly, and most emphatically, the Platonist school made divinization the hallmark of their spiritual program.³⁴ Porphyry speaks of virtue as the only way to “assimilate your thought to God,”³⁵ and the Neoplatonic curriculum was laid out precisely in order to lead the soul to this ascent.³⁶ In his textbook *The Handbook of Platonism*, Alcinous is

²⁶ For O’Meara’s account, upon which what follows here is heavily indebted, see Dominic J. O’Meara, *Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 31-9.

²⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, I.3.

²⁸ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 176b.

²⁹ Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, K.8, 1178b and *Metaphysics*, A.7, 1072b.

³⁰ Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, K.7, 1177b.

³¹ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 135.

³² Diogenes of Oinoanda, fr. 125, col. IV.

³³ O’Meara, *Platonopolis*, 34.

³⁴ “Likeness to God ... remained the distinctive Platonist definition of the telos.” John Dillon, *Alcinous: The Handbook of Platonism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), xxxviii.

³⁵ Porphyry, *Letter to Marcella*, 16.

³⁶ O’Meara, *Platonopolis*, 61.

clear: “[Plato] set forth as the end [for man] ‘assimilation to God as far as possible’.”³⁷

Elaborating further, he explains:

We are able to become similar to God if we have a proper nature, and also habits, conduct, and practice according to the law, and, most importantly, if we apply reason, teaching, and the tradition of teachings, so as to separate ourselves from the bulk of human affairs, and to always be inclined towards the intelligibles.³⁸

That a distinctive emphasis upon making the human divine follows from a divinized view of the cosmos is no great surprise. As Hadot observes regarding Plotinus, the “traditional terminology” of the hierarchy of being, ranging from the body all the way up to the One, “is used to express an inner experience. All these levels of reality become levels of inner life, levels of the self.”³⁹ The human corresponds to the cosmos as a whole in profound way in ancient philosophy, and so a cosmos understood in terms of divinity naturally leads to a humanity understood in similar terms.

In addition to the intellectual content of philosophy, both metaphysical and ethical, being shot through with religious concepts, there was also an element of ritual within the philosophical communities. This was commonly expressed by celebrations of the birthdays of major foundational philosophers. The Platonic schools took part in this tradition, as can be seen in Porphyry’s assertion that Plotinus carefully concealed his own birthday out of a concern that he himself might come to be venerated in a way he felt inappropriate. Nevertheless, “on the traditional birthdays of Plato and Socrates, he [Plotinus] offered sacrifice and entertained his

³⁷ Alcinous, *The Handbook of Platonism*, 28.

³⁸ Alcinous, *The Handbook of Platonism*, 28.

³⁹ Hadot, *Plotinus or The Simplicity of Vision*, Trans. Michael Chase (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 27. The second chapter (23-34) as a whole covers the concept of “Levels of the Self”.

companions, at which time those of his companions who were able had to read a discourse before those who had gathered.”⁴⁰

Even more striking was the cult of Epicurus and his close associates. Like Plato and Socrates, Epicurus, along with his close associate Metrodorus and a number of his family members, were celebrated within the Epicurean community.⁴¹ These celebrations were marked by meals, which naturally drew accusations of gluttony.⁴² Two elements of the feasts of Epicurus stand out as particularly unusual. First, alone among philosophers (at least, those to whose instructions we have access), Epicurus laid out provisions for his own cult.⁴³ Epicurean celebrations, then, were not just a spontaneous expression of the community’s love for its founder, but actually a planned part of its practice from the outset. Second, the celebrations were monthly, rather than annual, an honor reserved for divinities in Greek cult practice.⁴⁴ These celebrations were complemented by a vocabulary of veneration towards Epicurus that was shocking to many in the ancient world. Epicurus in his own writings presents himself and his philosophical compatriots as divine figures,⁴⁵ and he may have been referred to by his later followers as the “most excellent of friends” and the “one guide of upright speech and action, whom he calls ‘only savior’”.⁴⁶ Lucretius goes the whole way, exclaiming of Epicurus that “a

⁴⁰ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 2. Cf. the brief remarks on these events as part of the ordinary functioning of a Platonic school at Dillon, “The Academy in the Middle Platonic Period,” 76.

⁴¹ Diskin Clay, “The Athenian Garden,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. James Warren. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 22-6 provides a useful overview of the basic elements of the cult of Epicurus and those close to him.

⁴² Cf. Usener fr. 218.

⁴³ Clay, “The Athenian Garden,” 26.

⁴⁴ Clay, “The Athenian Garden,” 24.

⁴⁵ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 135.

⁴⁶ These last appellations (found at Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, fr. 41.7-8 and 40.5-9, respectively) are somewhat debated, and may properly belong to the Epicurean teacher, generally speaking, not necessarily to Epicurus himself. On the differing views, Glad, *Paul and Philodemus*, 158, n. 208, n. 209 cites various authorities on both sides of the question. Glad concludes that these titles should indeed be interpreted as belonging to Epicurus.

god he was, a god!”⁴⁷ As Clay notes, these heavenly honors were not mere metaphor, but rather were connected to the concept of divinization.⁴⁸ By speaking of Epicurus and his associates in this way, the practitioner reminded himself of his own potential to reach the level of the divine.

This nascent attention to cult, reflected boldly among the Epicureans and more cautiously elsewhere, would come to fruition by the fourth century when monasticism would have been interacting with philosophy directly. This time period saw a major increase in emphasis on traditional pagan ritual within the then-dominant Neoplatonic school of thought. This development was brought about through the influence of theurgy, prominently advocated by Iamblichus. Iamblichus’ theurgical project did not appear fully formed and unprecedented, of course. While Plotinus himself had little interest in cult, he had associates who were inclined in that direction, and wanted to involve him in such affairs. Apollonius of Tyana is presented by Philostratus as a philosopher piously devoted to proper service to the gods.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the great Syrian Platonist Iamblichus did hold a position of unique importance in the history of philosophy’s openness to ritual and cult. Through his various works, most famously *De Mysteriis*, he expounded an interpretation of traditional pagan worship according to which the real meaning of the rituals and sacrifices was not the appeasement of capricious gods, but the proper alignment of the self with the forces of nature and divinity. Divinity, on this view, rains down blessings constantly, but mankind is unable to receive them without proper cult. Therefore it is man, not the gods, who truly benefits from the offering of sacrifices.

⁴⁷ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, V.8.

⁴⁸ “The religious language Epicurus and his followers used to describe one another offended many non-Epicureans, but it is not mere hyperbole or hypocrisy. Rather it is the expression of the new conception of the serenity and tranquility of the philosopher who had come to resemble the Epicurean gods.” Clay, “The Athenian Garden”, 22.

⁴⁹ Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, 16.

While this certainly represents a substantial divergence from popular understandings of the meaning of pagan worship, it was a view that quickly gained influence within the realm of Neoplatonist philosophy. The descendants of Iamblichus were many indeed, and a substantial number (along with, in some cases, their miraculous deeds) are identified in Eunapius of Sardis' *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists*, which also touches upon Iamblichus himself. Iamblichus already had something of a following in his own lifetime, and these associates related to him in more than just an academic way, as can be seen from the fact that they pressed him to perform all his sacred rites in the presence of their philosophical/theurgic community.⁵⁰ In the decades following Iamblichus' death, his theurgic vision became the standard within the Neoplatonist world, with such illustrious followers as the Emperor Julian and Proclus,⁵¹ perhaps the last truly great pagan Neoplatonist.

Why exactly the theurgic view took such deep root in late Neoplatonism is difficult to say, but one theory merits mention. Some have suggested that the rise of a vibrant, and in the fourth century suddenly politically powerful, Christianity drove the growth of the combination of philosophy and cult that theurgy represented. Sarah Rappe suggests that Christianity's ability to ground its claims in revealed truth exerted a sort of "peer pressure" on pagan philosophers to produce similar "credentials".⁵² This felt need, according to Rappe, drove the rise in importance of texts like the Chaldean Oracles (and a higher regard for the Greek classics like Homer), as well as the emphasis on the "Golden Chain" of Platonic philosophy, whereby the sacred

⁵⁰ Eunapius of Sardis, *Lives of the Philosophers*, 458.

⁵¹ Marinus details a number of Proclus' religious practices, saying that he "fulfilled these customs unceasingly, as though they were obligations," including monthly trips to the sea, sacrifices, and prayers. Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, 18. Indeed, his entire philosophical mission was tied to various visions and omens. Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, 10.

⁵² Sarah Rappe, "The New Math: How to Add and to Subtract Pagan Elements in Christian Education," in *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, ed. Yun Lee Too (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 415. Rappe points out direct appeals to the revealed status of Platonic doctrines in Proclus and Damascius.

doctrines could be traced back on lines of personal authority to Plato himself. Additionally, it seems that in earlier centuries, the disparate elements of pagan society stood out against one another in clearer relief. When confronted with a powerful Christianity, however, all those committed to the old order had reason to draw together. Christianity rejected pagan cult and demanded substantial modifications in the approach to pagan literature and philosophy in a way that threatened all “Hellenes”. In this context, it is no surprise that a new alliance could be formed between pagan cult and the spiritual quest of pagan philosophy.⁵³ In any event, by the fourth century, and certainly by the fifth, Platonism, traditional cult, and resistance to Christian hegemony were all closely connected.⁵⁴

These observations, then, combine to show that ancient philosophy was a profoundly religious enterprise. This was true in a meaningful sense from the earliest days of Socrates and Plato, continued in the imperial period, and reached new heights in the theurgic synthesis that emerged in the fourth and fifth centuries. What is more, in this late period, this religiosity was in many cases closely tied to the decision to pursue philosophy. Although he was never a Christian, Damascius’ conversion from rhetoric to philosophy was marked by a profound intensification of his pagan piety, including visiting many pagan religious sites.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the philosophical school of Horapollo, which Polymnia Athanassiadi calls “a citadel of the new paganism”⁵⁶ and “a hotbed of Hellenism in both intellectual and spiritual terms,”⁵⁷ was well-known for converting

⁵³ It is important to note that this cannot serve as an explanation of the origins of theurgic thought, as Iamblichus developed his theories prior to the period of Christian ascendancy. It may, however, have something to say to us about why these theories found such a ready audience in the fourth and fifth centuries.

⁵⁴ This also drove a more private attitude towards philosophy, reflected in the close circles, out of the public eye, in which Proclus and Damascius operated. Lamberton, “The Schools of Platonic Philosophy of the Roman Empire,” 448-9.

⁵⁵ Polymnia Athanassiadi, *Damascius: The Philosophical History, text with translation and notes* (Athens: Apamea Cultural Association, 1999), 33-5.

⁵⁶ Athanassiadi, *Damascius: The Philosophical History*, 22.

⁵⁷ Athanassiadi, *Damascius: The Philosophical History*, 27.

Christian students to pagan religious practice. Horapollo brought so many Christian over to Hellenism, in fact, that he earned the punning moniker “Psychapollo”, or “Soul-Destroyer”.⁵⁸ There is also, of course, the case of the most famous conversion to philosophical paganism, that of Julian the Apostate. As Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler has argued, his conversion to philosophy was inextricably linked to his commitment to devotion to the traditional gods.⁵⁹ In the pagan philosophy of the fourth and fifth centuries, then, adoption or intensification of pagan ritual practice was directly tied to conversion to philosophy. Given this fact, along with the long tradition of philosophical religiosity dating back to Thales, it is appropriate to speak of philosophy – especially the philosophy with which the early monastic communities would have directly interacted – in terms of conversion.

Characteristics of Conversion

For the purposes of monasticism and philosophy, conversion has been shown to be a fitting term, but we have already eschewed the idea of having one fixed definition. Instead, this chapter will center upon three chief characteristics present in both monastic and philosophical conversion. The first characteristic pertains to the concept of an observable change in identity upon conversion. We will utilize the idea of a “bright line”, a time in the life of a convert after which a new identity has been adopted. After the convert has crossed this bright line, both the monk and the philosopher undertake a certain degree of withdrawal from the rest of society. Finally, one of the most important results of recent conversion studies has been the realization

⁵⁸ Athanassiadi, *Damascius: The Philosophical History*, 21.

⁵⁹ Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler, *Konversion zur Philosophie in der Spätantike: Kaiser Julian und Synesios von Kyrene*. Stuttgart (Franz Steiner Verlag, 2008), 99-107. Cf. especially Ibid, 106: “Die untersuchten Quellen zur Begegnung Julians mit der Philosophie weisen alle auf eine religiöse Komponente hin: der philosophische Unterricht des Maximus impliziert für Julian neben der Aufnahme einer neuen Lebensweise auch eine religiöse Umorientierung.” Tanaseanu-Döbler extensively discusses the varying views in Neoplatonism on the role of ritual (Ibid, 27-56), with some philosophers downplaying its importance, while others (most notably Iamblicus) giving it a central role.

that conversion is deeply embedded in social networks and communities. Neither monastic nor philosophical conversion is an exception in this regard; for both, conversion always involves entry into a new community with a distinct way of life. This process of assimilation into a community is mediated through one social relationship in particular, that of the teacher and the disciple. This mandatory relationship formed the entry point for prospective philosophers and monks.

Before entering into this discussion, one brief note is in order. In both philosophy and monasticism, potential converts always faced the possibility of being rejected. A variety of factors, including lack of intellectual capacity, moral weakness, excessive attachment to the world, and more could all lead to prospective converts being rejected. Proclus's moral qualities, for example, are presented as having been instrumental in his admission to the classes of various philosophers.⁶⁰ Later, according to Damascius, Proclus applied moral tests to his own prospective students, rejecting those unable to master their bodily desires.⁶¹ Conversion might also be conditional upon following through on a commitment to moral reform. The story of Polemo's turn to philosophy from drunkenness, discussed below, would seem to require that he actually succeed in escaping his bad habits.⁶² Surely some students attempted such a turn, but failed in it. From this, it seems to follow that students who fell prey to such unacceptable habits later on in their careers would also have been in danger of expulsion. The *Apophthegmata* does not provide much praise for elders or communities expelling failing monks. It clearly was a possibility, however. The presence of stories about an elder forestalling a monk's expulsion by

⁶⁰ Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, 8-12.

⁶¹ Damascius, *Philosophical History*, 91 A-B. Ibid, 145 B speaks of how it was necessary for Proclus to deem someone worthy for them to be admitted to his lectures on the Chaldean Oracles. Ibid, 99C also appears to speak obscurely of someone being rejected from philosophical study.

⁶² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IV.16.

emphasizing non-judgment and forgiveness indicates that, on at least some occasions, monks could be kicked out of the community.⁶³ Similarly, there are few stories of outright rejection, although we do hear on one occasion of Macarius attempting to turn away a pair of monks, only to be persuaded by their diligence.⁶⁴ Aspirants might also be subjected to stringent, and even bizarre, tests to determine their fitness for entry.⁶⁵ As we go on to discuss the phenomenon of conversion, then, as well as the teaching and spiritual exercises that follow upon it, we must bear in mind that we are talking about what is done in the cases of those judged capable of succeeding in the philosophical or monastic way of life.

A Bright Line

Modern studies of religious change lead us to expect a meaningful change of identity in those transformations that can be properly understood as conversion. This does not necessarily include a total rejection of one's prior beliefs and practices, but it does mean a real change in how the individual in question understands himself as well as taking on (at least outwardly) new beliefs and practices.⁶⁶ Likewise, it does not require a simplistic view of an instantaneous transformation. Some have expressed the relationship between the "bright line" element and the convert's ongoing development by identifying "recruitment" and "conversion" as separate concepts. In this framework, "recruitment" refers to the convert's initial entry into the new religious community. "Conversion" then becomes the ongoing process of formation by which

⁶³ Systematic Collection, IX.1-2, 10.

⁶⁴ Systematic Collection, XX.3.

⁶⁵ Systematic Collection, VI.1. We have more explicit evidence as to how cenobitic communities handled these initial examinations. See Edward Watts, *Riot in Alexandria: Tradition and Group Dynamics in Late Antique Pagan and Christian Communities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 100 (esp. n. 22) for the basics of how Pachomian communities approached new applicants.

⁶⁶ Bøgh, "Beyond Nock: From Adhesion to Conversion in the Mystery Cults," *History of Religions*, vol. 54, no. 3 (2015): 270-1. Bøgh raises this point in defense of her claim that entering a mystery cult could be a form of conversion, but the point applies just as well to philosophy and (even more so) monasticism. The new philosopher did not have to reject his pagan cultural heritage *tout court*, and new monks from Christian background did not adopt new doctrinal views. In all three cases, conversion does not involve rejection of the convert's prior life.

the convert learns and interiorizes the beliefs, values, and practices of the community.⁶⁷ While this dissertation does not adopt this particular terminology, the distinction is valid, and the concepts in question are certainly at work. This section, identifying the importance of dividing lines, coincides with this concept of “recruitment”. The discussions of pedagogy and spiritual exercises, meanwhile, represent the extent to which any conversion is a lifelong process, involving both individual commitment and guidance from other members of the community.

Beginning with philosophy, it is possible to identify a basic shift in priorities and, perhaps even more significantly, a basic shift in the grounding of those priorities and in the means of pursuing them. The philosophical life begins when someone comes to accept that they do not have knowledge, they do not know first principles, and they do not have the resources to make proper value judgments. These realizations bring with them a desire to find a more secure foundation.⁶⁸ The quintessential example here, of course, is Socrates, who only knew that he knew nothing, but the paradigm holds more broadly. Philosophy purports, through the use of reason, to provide an actual foundation for belief and action, as opposed to relying upon mere opinion or the preferences of the crowd. It is for this reason that philosophy bears the name it does: it is the quest for wisdom, for genuine knowledge. Alcinous sets this in a Platonist context when he says, “Philosophy is yearning for wisdom, or the freeing and turning around of the soul from the body, when we turn towards intelligible things and true being; and wisdom is the science of divine and human matters.”⁶⁹ The identification of the search for wisdom with this “turning” of the soul corresponds precisely to the idea of conversion.⁷⁰ There is a departure from

⁶⁷ Eshleman, “Affection and Affiliation: Social Networks and Conversion to Philosophy,” *The Classical Journal*, vol. 103, no. 2 (2007-8): 130.

⁶⁸ A. A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 101-2.

⁶⁹ Alcinous, *The Handbook of Platonism*, 1.

⁷⁰ Nock, for his part, actually identifies the turn to philosophy as the *only* genuine conversion within the pagan world: “In fact the only context in which we find it [conversion] in ancient paganism is that of philosophy, which

that which is dubious and uncertain, and a turn to what is true, and truly knowable. This brings with it a new set of goals and practices.⁷¹

We also see here a seeker-oriented approach to conversion that corresponds with much contemporary research. Where earlier studies tended to see converts as passive subjects of a process not entirely under their control, more recent work has focused on the “active agency of converts”⁷² in their own transformations. Converts do not just respond to the stimulus of a new religious view that they encounter; they frequently actively seek out new ways of engaging with and understanding the world. This image, popular in the ancient literature, of philosophy beginning in the individual’s felt need for a firmer grounding and his active search for such a solution, turns out to be surprisingly modern.

A look at some of the primary sources may make this point more clear. Plotinus, according to Porphyry, was “moved to philosophy” in his twenty-eighth year, but left the lectures of all the philosophers he could find “downcast and full of sorrow.” After a friend wisely recommended that he study with Ammonius Saccas, Plotinus went to hear his teaching and exclaimed, “This is the man I was seeking.”⁷³ The emotional turmoil Plotinus felt, characterized by passion, despondency, and then delight at finding the right man, does not correspond to the

held a clear concept of two types of life, a higher and a lower, and which exhorted men to turn from the one to the other.” Nock, *Conversion*, 14.

⁷¹ “Philosophy, being a way of life, not merely a system of doctrine, was expected to revolutionise the ambitions and pursuits of its adherents.” Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints*, 16, n. 1. Polymnia Athanasiadi, in a more polemical mode than Edwards, refers to the turn from rhetorical study to philosophy as “a decision which meant the change from a life of cultivated inanity to the passionate search for God through the wonders of nature and the words of inspired men.” Athanassiadi, *Damascius*, 39.

⁷² Rambo and Farhadian, “Introduction,” 7. For the fountainhead of this line of thinking, see John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective,” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 30, no. 6 (1965): 868. Each person who ended up converting to the Unification Church in their study, “came to define himself as a religious seeker, a person searching for some satisfactory system of religious meaning to interpret and resolve his discontent, and each had taken some action to achieve this end.”

⁷³ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 3. A similar story, from a Christian philosopher, can be found in Justin Martyr’s description of his years spent in philosophical study in the *Dialogue with Trypho*, 2.

experience of choosing a professional instructor, or (for a modern analogy) choosing one's undergraduate major. It is comparable to a search for the meaning of all things. Diogenes Laertius provides a number of narratives of philosophical conversions, some of which include quite dramatic moments. Xenophon became a follower of Socrates when the latter asked him "Where do men become noble [the frozen form "*kaloi kagathoi*"]?" When Xenophon was unable to answer, Socrates responds, "Follow, then, and learn."⁷⁴ On another occasion, a drunken Polemo, wearing a garland, burst in on a class that Xenocrates was teaching. Unperturbed, Xenocrates continued with what appears to have been a discourse on temperance. Xenocrates' steadfastness moved Polemo to reform himself.⁷⁵ Zeno's conversion recalls that of Xenophon before him. He inquired once where men like Socrates were to be found. A bookseller pointed out Crates to Zeno and said "Follow this man."⁷⁶ Despite the considerations already noted regarding the complex, process-oriented nature of conversion, philosophical biographers at least were comfortable portraying fairly dramatic turns. The key, however, lies in the fact that these turns were not end points, but rather beginnings. They opened out onto a radical and rigorous process of transformation, a process characterized above all by the relationship with the teacher that is the subject of this chapter.⁷⁷ A commitment to philosophy demanded such a profound change.

For new monks from a Christian background, monastic conversion was not doctrinally charged in the way philosophical conversion was, but it was still a comparably radical change.

⁷⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, II.48. A similarly dramatic story describes how Plato came to be a student of Socrates. Ibid, III.6.

⁷⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IV.16.

⁷⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VII.3.

⁷⁷ Note that in none of the examples cited does the convert turn to philosophy in the abstract. Plotinus turns to Ammonius Saccas, Plato and Xenophon turn to Socrates, Polemo turns to Xenocrates, and Crates turns to Zeno. Already the intrinsic nature of the teaching relationship to the philosophical life is beginning to emerge.

While joining a philosophical school meant learning and adhering to its doctrines, monasticism was not characterized by a distinct Trinitarian theology, a unique Christology, or anything on those lines. Rather, it was defined by a new level of commitment to following the dictates of the Gospel in an exacting way, to working out one's salvation apart from any distractions in a new lifestyle. In this way, monastic conversion, like philosophical, represents a fundamental change of priorities. Specifically, it was supposed to entail a total commitment to attaining salvation, as is reflected in some of the stories of monastic conversions. In one, an elder tells of a young man who wanted to become a monk, but had to overcome his mother's objections. "I wish to save my soul", he insisted, and eventually overcame her opposition and entered the monastic path.⁷⁸ A similar story is told about Abba Arsenius, regarding the motivations that sent him to the Desert. "When Abba Arsenius was still in the palace, he prayed to God, saying, 'Lord, show me the way to be saved.' A voice came to him, saying, 'Arsenius, flee from men, and you will be saved.'"⁷⁹ It was concern for salvation, then, that formed (or, in theory, was supposed to form) the basis for a monastic conversion. This decision was normally made in the late stages of adolescence or in adulthood.⁸⁰ The norm, then, was that someone who had reached the age of personal responsibility and considered salvation to be the highest priority would abandon worldly ambitions for money, career advancement, and status, as well as familial and social ties, in order to enter on this new path.

⁷⁸ He bungled the matter rather badly for a time, until a visionary experience of his mother suffering in Hell set him permanently on a rigorous path. Systematic Collection, III.38.

⁷⁹ Systematic Collection, II.3.

⁸⁰ There are a few occasions of child monks in the *Apophthegmata*, but they are clearly anomalous, the result of men bringing their children with them when they became monks. Cf. Systematic Collection, V.25 and XIV.28. The idea of children in the Desert was not always regarded in a positive light; Macarius the Egyptian is supposed to have predicted that children living at Scetis would be a sign of its imminent desolation. Systematic Collection, XVIII.16. While parents donating a child to a monastic community was an established practice in Late Antiquity, it is not mentioned in the Systematic Collection.

The primary outward sign of monastic conversion was the renunciation of property, a renunciation that was in theory to be absolute.⁸¹ This total renunciation has been identified as a distinguishing marker between monasticism and lay asceticism generally.⁸² At one point, the decision to become a monk is equated with having “left everything behind on account of God.”⁸³ Amma Syncletica describes entering monastic life in the following terms: “We have given ourselves over into exile; that is, we have become external to worldly cares.”⁸⁴ Macarius the Egyptian recounts a similar saying, which he says he received from two men living alone deep in the desert: “If someone does not renounce all the things of the world, he is not able to become a monk.”⁸⁵ Failing to live up to this radical expectation could earn a monk at least a stern rebuke, and possibly worse. Cassian reports a reprimand Basil laid upon a senator who sought to become a monastic, but without making the requisite renunciation. “You have lost your senatorial rank,” he scolded the man, “and you have not made a monk.”⁸⁶ Antony, in one of the more extreme teaching moments in the entire Sayings tradition, confronted a brother who had made the same mistake. He ordered the new brother to go buy meat, hang it from his naked body, and return. When he came back to Antony, torn apart by birds and dogs trying to get a free meal, he was sharply informed, “Those who, having renounced the world, wish to have

⁸¹ That this was not the case in practice, or at least not the case in the way we might expect, is obvious, if from nothing else, then from the frequent references to the monks working to earn money, owning food, clothing, work materials, and so forth. Likewise, it would be difficult to make sense of sayings like Systematic Collection XVI.8, 21, and 28, in which cells are robbed, if there was literally nothing in them. On the property that monks may well have been expected to have, including productive land, cf. for example Roger Bagnall, “Monks and Property: Rhetoric, Law, and Patronage in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and the Papyri,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 42 (2001): 20-3.

⁸² Dilley, “Care of the Other in Ancient Monasticism”, 41.

⁸³ Systematic Collection, XI.118.

⁸⁴ Systematic Collection, XIV.18.

⁸⁵ Systematic Collection, XX.4.

⁸⁶ Systematic Collection, VI.14.

money are cut apart in this way by the demons who make war.”⁸⁷ While the reality certainly did not always (or even usually) match the ideal completely, it is clear that the monks saw a radical renunciation of property as essential to their vocation, and as a critical marker of the monastic life.

This outward sign of renunciation, giving up property, along with donning the monastic habit, marked the point at which one became a monk, a transformation that was supposed to stand as a bright dividing line in one’s life. The strength of this transformation can be seen first of all by the sharp distinction made in the *Apophthegmata* between monks (“*monachoi*”) and people living in the world, be it in cities, villages, or farm country (“*kosmikoï*”).⁸⁸ Even at the last judgment, according to one vision, it would be possible to distinguish those “of our schema” from people in the world.⁸⁹ A key part of this sharp division between monks and people of the world was the higher expectations monks faced, and the greater achievements that they were thought capable of. So great was the potential of a monk that, in another vision, a demon who, after years of effort, induced one monk to sin was rewarded by Satan, while other demons who had stirred up all manner of discord and strife in the world at large were disdained, having achieved nothing difficult.⁹⁰ The reason is due to the belief that monks had resources at hand for

⁸⁷ Systematic Collection, VI.1. The reality, as always, is more complex than the idealized portrait of the *Apophthegmata* indicates. Extricating oneself from the world was then, as now, a complex process, involving escaping a variety of personal, social, and economic relationships. To see the nuances more clearly, other sorts of texts are more valuable, texts like the Letters of Barsanuphius and John, notable for their practical advice. While also advocating renunciation, they make it clear that one’s affairs in the world need to be settled fairly and with care before entering into the monastic life. Cf. Barsanuphius and John, *Letters*, 571-2. Jennifer Hevelone-Harper provides a fuller discussion of the Old Men’s interlocutor in these letters, one Aelianos, and his journey from being a layman closely associated with a monastic community to being the abbot of that community in Jennifer Hevelone-Harper, *Disciples of the Desert: Monks, Laity, and Spiritual Authority in Sixth-Century Gaza* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 119-25.

⁸⁸ A “*kosmikos*” could be a non-Christian or a Christian lay person. Clerics, however, even when living in the world, are still referred to by their ecclesiastical titles.

⁸⁹ Systematic Collection, III.33. It should be noted that, although the distinction was preserved in the eschaton, it was not the dividing line between saved and damned. Indeed, the point of the vision was precisely to indicate that monks could be lost and seculars saved.

⁹⁰ Systematic Collection, V.44.

the spiritual life far exceeding those of the regular lay Christian, and certainly more than any pagan. A monk could draw upon his extensive knowledge of Scripture, the advice of his elder, various spiritual exercises, inner prayer, and more, resources which someone living in the world might not have, or have in a limited way. Even after a fall into sin, monks were seen to have the ability to dig themselves out and return to the spiritual path much more easily than others, largely on account of these spiritual resources.⁹¹

A key element in this sharp distinction, and a gauge of the seriousness of monastic conversion, can be found in the gravity that surrounded a decision to return to the world. “Going back to the world” for a monk is presented not simply as a change of profession or path in life or as the sinful abandonment of monastic vows. Rather, leaving the monastic state and returning to the secular world is taken to imply the loss of a monk’s salvation. Monks who fell into sin would often contemplate returning to the world, often prompting others to make great efforts to hold them to their monastic commitments.⁹² A decision to return to the world was presented as coming from a desire to pursue sinful practices, or even from a sense that perhaps married life would be a better path after all. Rather, as we learn from a saying of Abba Cassian’s, it was understood as coming from a position of despair. Thus we hear of a young monk, and later his elder, when he is confronted with the same temptations, setting out to return to the world on because he believed that he had lost his salvation. Only the intervention of Abba Apollo brings them back.⁹³ For this reason an unnamed brother pleads with a fellow monk who wanted to return to the world, “I will not permit you, my brother, to go and destroy your toil and your

⁹¹ Systematic Collection, V.22.

⁹² Systematic Collection, V.28 and V.31, for example.

⁹³ Systematic Collection, V.4.

virginity.”⁹⁴ Returning to the world, then, was synonymous with serious sin, despair of salvation, and the undoing of all that had been accomplished in the monastic life. While, as noted above, it was entirely possible for someone living in the world to be a pious Christian and be saved (and even to be better than the monks), for someone to commit to the monastic life and then abandon it, returning to the world, was the gravest of sins, directly connected with the loss of salvation. The line, then, between monk and secular was not only sharply drawn, it was also permanently drawn.⁹⁵

The “bright line” nature of a monastic commitment is likewise evident in the way the *Apophthegmata* speaks of life as divided into before and after the taking of the habit. Monks would often speak of having done (or not done) certain things since taking the habit, but never refer to before and after baptism in the same way. On one occasion, a monk is offered meat, and he responds that he has not eaten meat since taking the habit. Epiphanius, an ascetic bishop, replies that, “As for me, from the time when I took the schema, I have not allowed anyone to go to sleep having something against me, nor did I go to sleep having something against anyone,” compelling the first monk to ask forgiveness.⁹⁶ Similarly, a certain Abba John asks Arsenius what he has achieved in solitude. Arsenius tells him that, “Since I became a monk, the sun has never seen me eating.” Abba John then one-ups Arsenius, replying, “Nor [has it seen] me angry.”⁹⁷ Even more striking is the statement of Abba Isidore, when asked why the demons fear him. He says, “Since I became I monk, I have endeavored to not allow anger to rise up to my

⁹⁴ Systematic Collection, V.32. While it becomes clear later in the saying that the monk returning to the world intended to commit sexual sin, at this point all the brother knows is that his comrade wants to return to the world. This alone is enough to raise the issue of losing his monastic labors.

⁹⁵ At least so far as the *Apophthegmata*’s idealized portrait would have it. It is quite possible that some people, upon abandoning the monastic life, would have reintegrated perfectly well into the Christian community in their native town or city. It is essential to recall here the point made in the introduction that the *Apophthegmata* is not providing historical precision, but rather working to create an identity and practice for a community.

⁹⁶ Systematic Collection, IV.15.

⁹⁷ Systematic Collection, IV.26.

throat.”⁹⁸ Whether or not Isidore may have become angry while living in the world does not seem relevant; it is only his way of life *after* taking the habit that the demons consider, and this they find terrifying. Becoming a monk radically severed one’s connection to the world and to one’s previous life in it, giving rise to a number of sayings in which monks refer to themselves as being already in the grave. Arsenius was once asked to accept some money left to him in a will, to which he responded, “I died before him.”⁹⁹ The person who had been Arsenius in the world was nowhere to be found. The commitment to monastic life, then, was at least as fundamental a division in a monk’s life as baptism, and, indeed, baptism is hardly mentioned in the *Apophthegmata*. On a rare occasion when it is mentioned, it is specifically compared to the taking of the monastic habit. A visionary monk says that, “The power which I saw present at illumination, I also saw it at the clothing of a monk when he received the schema.”¹⁰⁰ The two commitments, then, were at least equal, and if anything, the monastic was the greater transformation.

This is confirmed when accounts of the pre-monastic religious affiliation of the Desert Fathers are examined. In a few cases, we hear of people who are specifically identified as Christians (usually pious Christians, though there is a story about a bishop who offered sacrifice

⁹⁸ Systematic Collection, IV.24. The word I have translated as “endeavored” is “*askō*” – literally, “trained” or “practiced”, the same root as “asceticism”.

⁹⁹ Systematic Collection, VI.2

¹⁰⁰ Systematic Collection, XVIII.36. Illumination, “*phōtisma*” was an ordinary term for baptism in patristic Greek. Cf. G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 1509b. Wortley, *The Book of the Elders*, 329 instead translates “*phōtisma*” as “a moment of illumination”, a choice I cannot agree with. Not only is illumination a perfectly standard term for baptism, but additionally, the passage loses much of its rhetorical force if it is not a comparison of two ritual acts that transform a person’s identity. Wortley seems to be following Guy’s “au moment de l’illumination” (Guy, *Les apophtegmes des pères: Collection systématique*, vol. 3, 89), but the definite articles in Guy, as well as his footnote, indicate a connection with baptism, a connection lost in Wortley’s rendering.

during a persecution becoming a monk¹⁰¹) deciding to adopt a monastic life.¹⁰² Less often, someone from an explicitly non-Christian context becomes a Christian and a monk concurrently. In this category we find a pagan priest, who heard a demon relating how it had been tormented by a monk's humility, deciding to become a monk and was later renowned for his own humility.¹⁰³ In a similar vein, a Manichaean presbyter (roughly the equivalent of a Christian bishop)¹⁰⁴ is astonished by the hospitality he receives from a monk, despite their religious differences. He decides that "truly this is a man of God," and declares, "I am orthodox from this day," and becomes the monk's disciple.¹⁰⁵ These cases, however, are the exceptions, and – certainly in the case of the pagan and the Manichee – are aimed at making specific points. The majority of sayings that mention a conversion to the monastic life, by contrast, simply ignore the religious affiliation of the convert prior to his or her embarking on the monastic way. Thus we hear about "two young foreigners" who came "from wealth" becoming monks, but we learn nothing about their previous religious practice or that of their parents.¹⁰⁶ Elsewhere, there is "a secular youth who had a father and wanted to become a monk". All we learn about his

¹⁰¹ Systematic Collection XX.16. There is also a story about a young woman, daughter of a good father and sinful mother, who is propelled into the ascetic life by a dramatic visionary experience. Given that her father was a Christian, she was probably at least nominally a Christian herself, but does not easily fall into the categories of piety or impiety, as she was on the brink of making her choice of paths when the vision struck her. Systematic Collection, XVIII.45.

¹⁰² Systematic Collection XIV.32 and XV.111. There is also the case of Systematic Collection, II.29, in which three "*philoponoi*" become monks. Guy, *Les apophtegmes des pères: Collection systématique, vol. 1*, 141, n. 1 and Wortley, *The Book of the Elders*, 21 agree on identifying these men with the religious society known as the "*philoponoi*". The same adjective, however, is also used elsewhere in the *Apophthegmata* to simply mean "one who loves labor" (Systematic Collection XVI.14, for example), a basic trait of the monastic life. Therefore the identification with the society may be probable, but cannot be regarded as completely certain.

¹⁰³ Systematic Collection, XV.112.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Jason David BeDuhn, *Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma 2: Making a "Catholic" Self, 388-401 C.E.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 446-7: "The rank of *presbyter* in the Manichaean Church had a higher standing than its Catholic namesake, and was equivalent to that of a Catholic bishop. In theory, Fortunatus was one of only 360 presbyters in the Manichaean hierarchy; but we have no means to ascertain whether this ideal number was adhered to in the face of local leadership needs."

¹⁰⁵ Systematic Collection, XIII.12.

¹⁰⁶ Systematic Collection, XX.3.

religious context is that his father was resistant, but was persuaded by his “faithful friends”.¹⁰⁷

This could just as easily be said about a pagan father with some Christian friends, however, as about a Christian father. Even in the case of a famous monk like Arsenius, the account of his conversion to monasticism only notes that “When Abba Arsenius was still in the palace, he prayed to God,” asking how he could be saved.¹⁰⁸ While this could certainly be read as implying that Arsenius was a lay Christian, the same phrasing could just as well apply to a non-Christian (or merely nominal Christian) who reached a point of personal crisis and cried out for divine guidance. Again and again in *Apophthegmata*, the same pattern emerges. While most new monks probably did come from Christian backgrounds, the text simply does not care about their prior religious commitments.¹⁰⁹ This fact more than anything else demonstrates plainly that the decision to pursue salvation through the monastic life, symbolically marked by renunciation of worldly property and taking up the monastic habit, was the basic dividing line in the monk’s life. While piety in this life and salvation in the next were available to those living in the world, for those who chose to become monks, this choice was more fundamental than the moment of baptism for their identity.

Again, as was the case with ancient philosophy, these bright-line moments and sharp divisions did not mean that there was not a long process involved in fully taking on the monastic life. Many times in the *Apophthegmata* the limitations of even the most advanced monks are emphasized. Even the great Abba Macarius the Egyptian, when asked for a word, once said, “I

¹⁰⁷ Systematic Collection, VII.31.

¹⁰⁸ Systematic Collection, II.3.

¹⁰⁹ Systematic Collection, III.38, VI.1, VI.14, X.172, X.175, XIV.28, and XVIII.47 all follow this approach. Some sayings specifically indicate a morally reprehensible life prior to monastic conversion, but remain silent on whether the person in question was a pagan, or just a misbehaving Christian. Systematic Collection, XIII.18, XV.131, and XVII.34 (two harlots and a sinful government official) all fit into this category.

have not yet become a monk, but I have seen monks.”¹¹⁰ His many years of ascetic practice and his high standing in the monastic community have, in his mind, still not yet earned him the right to think of himself as having fully mastered the monastic life. Abba Pambo, at the point of death, came to a similar conclusion. Despite his many ascetic achievements, which he recounts, he still feels that “I depart to God as one who has not begun to serve him.”¹¹¹ As the discussion of the spiritual exercises (especially remembrance of death and vigilance) in chapter three will make clear, we are not entitled to dismiss these statements as pious platitudes. Rather, like the philosophers, they knew that conversion marked a bright line in one’s life, but living out all the implications of that conversion was a lifelong process, never fully complete until death.

Withdrawal

Conversion to either the monastic or philosophical life, then, marked the fundamental choice in the convert’s life, and a clear line could be drawn between former and later lives – although, as noted above, what actually took place on one side or the other of this line remained a complex matter. The line between the earlier life and the life of philosophy (in either the classical or monastic sense), however, was not the only line drawn when such a conversion was made. A degree of withdrawal from the world at large, its concerns, its pettiness, and its triviality was also a key part of the ideology of both bodies of literature. While monastic withdrawal, at least as we find it in the *Apophthegmata*, was more drastic, the concept was by no means absent from the philosophical context either.

Within the philosophical communities, this withdrawal had two major features. The first was a retreat from political and social engagements, and from the expectations of the world. The

¹¹⁰ Systematic Collection, XX.4. Macarius then goes on to tell of two monks living together, in total isolation from the rest of the world.

¹¹¹ Systematic Collection, I.25.

second was a distancing of the philosopher from the religious views of the rest of society.

Beginning with the first kind of withdrawal, Dominic O'Meara has noted the presence of this tradition, in different forms, in the Epicurean, Stoic, and Platonist schools. Both Socrates and Plato withdrew from political engagement in certain ways, Epicurus remained "well hidden in his garden", and the Stoic sage "retreats into the inner citadel of his freedom of judgement, indifferent to and above the vicissitudes of politics, even if he be, like Marcus Aurelius, emperor."¹¹² Naturally this "withdrawal" is a complex thing in these schools, as Marcus, even in his withdrawal, governed an empire, and Plato in his produced extensive treatises on political theory. Nevertheless, while their withdrawal was not as radical as that of the shocking Cynics or the belief-free Skeptics, some sense of retreat from the public square was valued in the major schools.

Beginning with the most obvious case, there are the Epicureans. The adherents of the Garden were largely quietists, and engaged in political activity only as it became strictly necessary for them to do so. The Epicureans had an ideal of independence from the surrounding world, preferring to form themselves for true virtue, apart from the desires and expectations of the many. This did not, it should be emphasized, entail living separately or not appearing in public.¹¹³ Rather, their withdrawal was to be one of attitude and outlook, not of visible

¹¹² O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 5-7. Cf. also Eshleman, "Affection and Affiliation", 133 on the need for a measure of withdrawal from non-philosophers.

¹¹³ At least in what seems to be the more current view of the matter. Respected scholars have argued the contrary, as in the case of A. A. Long, "Epicureans and Stoics", in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, vol. 15 of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1986), 138: "The school that he [Epicurus] established in his garden just outside the city wall of Athens was exactly what we would call today an alternative community. Its members were not only pupils and teachers but also friends who may have been encouraged to live there with their families." Ilsetraut Hadot also suggested that Epicurean practitioners would live "in retirement" with their spiritual leader, and argues for a similar approach among the Stoics as well. Ilsetraut Hadot, "The Spiritual Guide", in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, vol. 15 of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1986), 445. The two views might be reconciled to some degree if we assume that the Epicureans might have lived together or near to each other

separation.¹¹⁴ This meant that they might appear in public in the streets, the markets, at festivals and so on, without attracting attention. They were concerned, rather, to maintain a detached attitude from the concerns of the many. Epicurus and his direct successors had close ties to elites and were even involved in political matters from time to time.¹¹⁵ This involvement occurred only by necessity, however, and was not a feature of Epicurean life in the proper sense. In addition to this lack of interest in political engagement, the Epicureans were also not interested in becoming cultured members of the world of *paideia* which was closely identified with the echelons of power in the ancient world. “Flee all *paideia*, dear one, setting sail,” the philosopher exhorted his young pupil Pythocles.¹¹⁶ The Epicureans joined Plato in seeing the poets as full of lies, and wanted nothing to do with them. In the case of those who had already imbibed the spirit of *paideia*, it had to be rooted out.¹¹⁷ Given the vital role that this *paideia* played in maintaining structures of power, stepping away from cultured education entailed a level of withdrawal from political engagement as well. In these ways, the Epicureans worked to follow through on their desire to live quietly, unnoticed and untroubled by the whirl of the world.

For the Stoics, the matter is much more complicated, as their understanding of duty and service to the good of the human community prevented them from taking the quietist approach favored by the Epicureans. It is difficult indeed to argue that the Emperor Marcus Aurelius or the imperial tutor and advisor Seneca were not politically engaged individuals (an Epicurean emperor, by contrast, is a difficult thing to imagine). Nevertheless, there was still a real sense of

and spent much of their time together, but still conducting their business within the rest of society, not imposing the strict boundaries of a monastic enclosure.

¹¹⁴ “Contrary to modern misconceptions, the Epicureans did not live apart from the rest of the society; for the most part, they lived and worked with non-Epicureans.” Elizabeth Asmis, “Basic Education in Epicureanism”, in *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, ed. Yun Lee Too (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 214.

¹¹⁵ Clay, “The Athenian Garden,” 10.

¹¹⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, X.6.

¹¹⁷ Asmis, “Basic Education in Epicureanism”, 215-6.

separation between the Stoic and the world around him, even if he was in a position of power, influence, or fame within that world. The difference in this case was grounded in a fundamentally different approach to the world from that of the non-Stoic majority. In particular, this refers to the “inner citadel of his freedom of judgement” that O’Meara identified above. The many think that bodily ease, material wealth, and temporal success are genuinely good things in and of themselves, and should be pursued. The Stoic, by contrast, realizes that, while there may be a sort of natural preference for these things, they are not real values, as they are extrinsic to what is under the control of each person – they are not “up to us”. All that is “up to us” is our judgments about appearances and our moral virtue, and so real value can only be attached to these things. Therefore, while out of duty to humanity, a Stoic may don the mantle of power when an Epicurean would avoid it, he will do so with a detached attitude, unlike a non-philosophical Emperor. He (in theory) acts out of duty, judging by reason alone, not seeking any particular advantage.

The case of the Platonists is more complex, as there are many instances of Neoplatonic philosophers who worked closely with political powers. Plotinus’ travels with a military campaign likely indicate connections with the imperial retinue,¹¹⁸ and even under Constantine the philosopher Sopatros was linked to the imperial court.¹¹⁹ Platonist philosophers – Porphyry in particular – likewise exerted substantial influence over the decision making that led to the Diocletianic persecution, as has recently been shown.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, even in Porphyry (via his portrait of Plotinus), there are traces of an ideal of political withdrawal. In the case of one Zethus, we are informed that Plotinus “kept trying to draw him back from political involvement,

¹¹⁸ O’Meara, *Platonopolis*, 14.

¹¹⁹ O’Meara, *Platonopolis*, 17.

¹²⁰ Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *A Threat to Public Piety: Christians, Platonists, and the Great Persecution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012) examines this question in depth.

where he had real influence.”¹²¹ Likewise, there was the senator Rogatianus, who experienced a dramatic conversion to the philosophical life. As a result, “he made such progress in the renunciation of this [public] life that he put away all his property, sent off all his servants, and resigned his rank.” He did not even own a house, and “ate every other day,” an ascetic regimen that bought him renewed health after being unable to even move on his own. “Plotinus,” we are told, “received him favorably and praised him highly, and he continually put him forward as a good model for those who practice philosophy.”¹²² This ideal was nothing new for Plotinus, of course, and has roots going back to Socrates and Plato. Plato’s Socrates protests in the *Apology* that his *daimōn* “blocks me from practicing politics, and, it seems to me, it is entirely good that it blocks me ... it is necessary that the man who genuinely fights for justice, if he is going to survive even for a little while, be a private person, not a public man”¹²³ (though still discoursing in public spaces). Later, in the *Republic*, Plato would reflect further on the extent to which the philosopher would naturally want nothing to do with the insanity, the injustice, and the impiety of political affairs.¹²⁴

In different ways, then, the Stoics, Epicureans, and Platonists all practiced or longed for a certain degree of political withdrawal. That the Cynics did so is obvious, and how a Skeptic could be politically active while not having any beliefs is difficult to imagine. There is also

¹²¹ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 7.

¹²² Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 7. Another fellow, Serapion of Alexandria, provides the negative example. “He was not able to withdraw from the degradation of money and usury.” Ibid. Patricia Cox Miller explains the value of this withdrawal to the Plotinian spiritual project, arguing that detachment from the particularities of history and one’s own situation was necessary to ascend to the objective universals of the intelligible world: In order to perform its proper placing function with regard to spiritual reality, the soul must direct its vision inward: ‘Shut your eyes, and change to and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use’ (*Enn.* 1.6.8.26-28).” This opens out, incidentally, upon what she refers to as “the so-called ‘spiritual exercises.’” Patricia Cox Miller, “Shifting Selves in Late Antiquity”, in *Religion and the Self in Antiquity*, ed. David Brakke, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 19.

¹²³ Plato, *Apology*, 31d-32a.

¹²⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 496c-e.

some evidence of this attitude among the Academics, as in the case of Arcesilaus, who “was always spending time in the Academy, avoiding political affairs.”¹²⁵ It seems certain, then, that a degree of retreat from political ambitions (tied in many cases, no doubt, to an elite desire for leisured *otium*) was a common feature of ancient philosophy. Obviously, just as the monks were not always as far from the world as they liked to imagine, many philosophers were deeply engaged in politics. However, they did have an ideal of withdrawal and, when they would engage, were expected to do so with a measure of detachment and tranquility not shared by a court careerist.

In addition to the political and cultural withdrawal of the philosopher, there was also a measure of withdrawal from the religious concerns of society at large. This religious separatism, like political withdrawal, has its roots in the very foundations of ancient philosophy. While Socrates protests in the *Apology* that he was not an atheist,¹²⁶ his prosecutors certainly did not see the matter that way, nor did the assembly. Socrates does seem to have had some religious convictions (his famous *daimōn*, for one), but it is hard to disagree with the assembly that he did not profess the religion that the city practiced, however much one might dissent from the death sentence. As in the matter of political withdrawal, Socrates is not an idiosyncratic figure in the history of ancient philosophy, but a paradigm. Again, the case of the Cynics and Skeptics is clear enough. The Cynics abominated all social convention, and popular religion was no exception. For the Skeptics, it is no easier to imagine a belief-free theology than it is to imagine a belief-free political philosophy, and so, at least at the conceptual level, they held as aloof from religion as they did from all other matters.

¹²⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IV.39.

¹²⁶ Plato, *Apology*, 26c-28a.

The other schools, however, provide more interesting and detailed material in this regard.

The Epicureans were certainly the most radical of the religious dissenters among the philosophers of antiquity. Often disdainfully labelled as atheists, they actually did believe in the existence of the gods. Their interpretation, however, was deliberately, specifically, and radically opposed to the views of popular religion. Applying the Epicurean approach of avoiding pain and maximizing pleasure to religion, they saw the common understanding of the gods as a source of great mental distress. Capricious deities, demanding sacrifice and obedience, forever taking vengeance upon those who displeased them, did no one any good in Epicurus' mind, and only gave rise to constant worries about how best to keep them satisfied. As a consequence, Epicurus and his successors taught that the gods exist in a state of immortal blessedness, separated entirely from human concerns. The only relevance of the gods to Epicurean philosophy was to provide a model for human life. The life of the perfect Epicurean was that of a god. Added to this was the rejection of any concept of an individual afterlife. As the fear of death was an even greater source of distress than the fear of the gods, Epicurus chose to emphasize human mortality and the dissolution of the soul at death as something natural, and therefore not to be feared. In so doing, he aimed at assuaging concerns about annihilation at death, but also at abolishing fears of judgment and punishment in the afterlife. An Epicurean could still attend religious rites, and probably would as part of a policy of not attracting attention (and would find enjoyment in the festivities, no doubt), but the Epicurean attitude towards them would be radically different from that of the conventionally devout.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Asmis, "Basic Education in Epicureanism", 214. See n. 27 on that page for some examples of Epicurean participation in traditional cult.

The Stoics were also willing to participate in the religious cult of their society, but with serious reservations. Their difficulties were not the same as those of the Epicureans, but they were sufficient to require that any serious Stoic approach his religious life in a way distinct from pagan society in general. Both Seneca and Epictetus viewed traditional cult as something that could be compatible with philosophy, and indeed even something praiseworthy.¹²⁸ Stoics were also happy to express their philosophical and metaphysical beliefs in terms drawn from popular religion.¹²⁹ They even went to the trouble of adducing a number of arguments intended to prove the reality of the traditional gods (which they understood as representations of the cosmic god or of powers within the natural world, something that people naturally and correctly intuited).¹³⁰ Despite this respect for traditional piety, there remained a certain tension with elements of popular myth and cult that could not be reconciled with Stoic philosophical convictions. However natural and correct the human intuition about divinity might be, it could also be obscured over time by various corruptions and accretions. Part of the role of philosophy was the removal of these perverse developments in popular culture.¹³¹ Additionally, the most perfect worship of God was understood to be nothing more than living the morally upright life of the ideal sage, and it was for this reason that Zeno of Citium argued that, in a city comprised entirely of pure sages, there would be no need of temples at all.¹³² This does not imply that Stoics needed to advocate for an immediate ban upon traditional cult, as (1) it was not blameworthy and

¹²⁸ Keimpe Algra, "Stoic Philosophical Theology and Graeco-Roman Religion", in *God and Cosmos in Stoicism*, ed. Ricardo Salles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 230-1.

¹²⁹ Algra, "Stoic Philosophical Theology and Graeco-Roman Religion", 225.

¹³⁰ Cf. P. A. Meijer, *Stoic Theology: Proofs for the Existence of the Cosmic God and of the Traditional Gods* (Delft: Eburon, 2007), which provides a thorough study of Stoic arguments in favor of the existence of both the one God and the gods of traditional religion.

¹³¹ Algra, "Stoic Philosophical Theology and Graeco-Roman Religion", 234: "mainstream Stoicism was committed to an interesting combination of primitivism (the 'natural' world view of the people of old inevitably got corrupted), and progressivism (the subsequent development of philosophy can remedy this, and show us what can and cannot be salvaged)."

¹³² Algra, "Stoic Philosophical Theology and Graeco-Roman Religion", 238.

(2) the present world is not entirely populated by sages, and therefore there can still be benefits from proper attention to cult. While the Stoics did not ban sacrifice or cult, they also retained a real distance and ambivalence towards it, believing that true worship was found in virtue. A Stoic practitioner's religious life would have been quite different from that of the majority of pagan temple-goers.

The case of the Platonists, meanwhile, is perhaps the most interesting and complex of all the schools. In some respects (and for some Platonists), they took their separation from cult further than others did. Yet other, especially later, Platonists used their philosophy as a bulwark of traditional cult against the novel impiety of Christianity. We may say at the outset that the Platonists were nothing if not religious, especially by the Late Ancient period. The entirety of Neoplatonic philosophy was geared towards moving the soul to begin "contemplating the divine and the thoughts [*tas noēseis*] of the divine," at which point the good condition of the soul "is called 'wisdom' [*phronēsis*]"¹³³ However, the Neoplatonists expressed their piety in unconventional ways. For some, this meant a substantial retreat from cult, as appears to have been the case for Plotinus. This attitude can be seen in the famous incident in which one Amelius attempted to convince Plotinus to join him in his temple devotions to celebrate new moons and religious feasts. Plotinus tersely responded, "They should come to me, not I to them."¹³⁴ Although Plotinus was content to undergo a religious ritual to manifest his guardian spirit, indicating a less than total opposition to cult,¹³⁵ he was certainly not ritually devoted, and

¹³³ Alcinous, *The Handbook of Platonism*, 2.2.

¹³⁴ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 10. There is some debate on the exact meaning of this odd expression. As A. H. Armstrong, *Plotinus: Porphyry on Plotinus, Ennead I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966, revised 1989), 34-5, n. 1 notes, Plotinus may well have meant little more by this than "a determination to stop Amelius bothering him." However, Armstrong also notes that he may have shared Porphyry's dim view of the kinds of gods who accept sacrifice expressed in *On Abstinence*.

¹³⁵ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 10. Again, the exact import of the incident is not immediately obvious.

did not place cult at the heart of his religious life. For him, “the life of gods and of godlike and blessed men,” was located in “a life which finds no pleasure in the things of this world, flight of the alone to the alone.”¹³⁶ Any value in cult devotion, then, would only be found at a lower level. The height of mystical union with the One was found in solitude and immaterial tranquility.

Other Platonists also offered commentaries on popular cult, many at extended length. Porphyry gives the subject a thorough treatment in *De Abstinencia*, his brief in favor of vegetarianism. In this work, Porphyry criticizes any sort of blood sacrifice as fundamentally misguided. He asserts that blood sacrifices derive from the greedy hunger of lower, corrupt *daimones* who feed upon the smoke of sacrifices and grow bloated. He does not altogether deny the efficacy of such sacrifices, as these evil spirits will bring disasters if they do not receive their due. He sees this not as a proper mutual exchange between humanity and the gods, however, but as little more than an elaborate, ritualized protection racket.¹³⁷

There also developed a different school of thought, the theurgic approach founded by Iamblichus and continued by many Neoplatonists in the fourth and fifth centuries, that upheld sacrifice, but in a philosophized context. The theurgic school held that sacrifices were in reality not superstitious efforts to placate angry or capricious gods, but rather a divinely instituted method of opening oneself up to the various heavenly powers and draw upon their blessings. While the divine rains down blessings at all times, humans are not always properly capable of

¹³⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.9.11. Armstrong observes that this same phrase recurs “elsewhere in the *Enneads* when speaking of our encounter with the Good (I.6.7.8; VI.7.34.7).” Armstrong goes on to note that “it is in fact a fairly commonplace Greek phrase, generally, but not always, in a religious context,” with the nearest analogue being found in Numenius. A. H. Armstrong, *Plotinus: Ennead VI.6-9* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 344-5, n.2.

¹³⁷ Cf. the remarks on sacrifice in Gillian Clark, trans., *Porphyry: On Abstinence from Killing Animals* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 11-2.

receiving them. Religious rites correct this disconnect by putting the soul back in its proper balance.¹³⁸ In this way, Iamblichus and those who came after him were able to uphold and participate in popular religion, but their means of doing so imposed a distance between themselves and non-philosophical practitioners.

In both political/cultural matters and religious ones, then, philosophy involved a certain withdrawal or distancing of the philosopher from the unphilosophical many. This often did not require physical withdrawal, and at the external level the behavior of the philosopher might often not be readily distinguishable from that of anyone else. In a temple, for example, it is not clear how different Iamblichus' behavior would have been from that of an ordinary pagan, nor how different the policies of a philosophical emperor such as Aurelius would be from those of any other supreme ruler. Nevertheless, at an intellectual and moral level, there was always a substantial distance placed between any philosopher and any non-philosopher. This conscious distancing was a vital part of the identity of the philosopher, and must be emphasized when discussing what conversion to philosophy entailed.

It is essential precisely because philosophy was not alone in the ancient world as a means of intellectualized personal formation. The entire tradition of *paideia*, briefly alluded to already in this chapter, was no mere credentialing system or idle book knowledge. It was, rather, a powerful means by which the elite were formed for the purpose of holding the reins of power in the empire. There was even a philosophical element to this *paideia*; the masters of the land were certainly not all ignorant of Plato and Plotinus. If, then, we are to distinguish in some meaningful sense philosophy *specifically*, as opposed to the mere philosophical component of a

¹³⁸ Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, 2nd edition (Kettering: Angelico Press, 2014), 176-9.

general elite education, we must take into account the extent to which it required a certain distance, a certain detachment from the world of the many. The school of philosophy was, in O'Meara's words, "much more than a teaching institution: it could constitute, and sometimes did in Late Antiquity, a community of life and moral education."¹³⁹ Going beyond the aims of *paideia*, however, the philosophical school aimed at something more:

Indeed the curriculum of the Neoplatonic schools was so designed as to lead the pupil to live a different and higher life, a life as divine as possible, and the books used in the curriculum were assigned an appropriate edificatory function: these books were to be studied, not simply as sources of information, but especially as instruments for the formation of the soul, as pagan 'spiritual exercises, so to speak, leading the pupil to higher modes of life.¹⁴⁰

A different, divine life – *that* was the possibility extended by philosophy to its would-be practitioners. Here is something other than, though not necessarily opposed to, access to a cultured elite and the echelons of power. This struggle for a separate and god-like existence marked philosophy, and philosophers, off from the rest of educated society.

Speaking of the monks, by contrast, it hardly seems necessary to argue for some sense of withdrawal from the world. The entire vocabulary of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* is marked by a concern for flight from the world. A common term for a monk living as a hermit (as opposed to residing in a monastery) was "anchorite" (*anachōrētēs*), derived from the verb *anachōreō*, to withdraw or depart.¹⁴¹ With the ascetic movement, these words had taken on a precise, technical meaning, beyond simply withdrawing in any context. They specifically referred to an ascetic retreat from property, from familial and social relationships, from ordinary speech, and from the physical space of the city or village. Now it is well-known at this point that the story of ascetic

¹³⁹ O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 50. O'Meara in this quotation is speaking of the Platonic school, but adds in n. 1 on the same page that one could make similar observations about the Epicurean or Stoic school as well.

¹⁴⁰ O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 50-1. O'Meara here refers to the possibility of divinization in ancient philosophy. We will consider the meaning of this idea in the next section, on religiosity in ancient philosophy.

¹⁴¹ On these and other closely etymologically related terms, see Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, 128b-9b.

withdrawal and total separation from the world was, in fact, much more complex than the literary sources constructed it to be.¹⁴² Nevertheless, it was certainly an ideal and, for the eremitic communities which are the focus of the *Apophthegmata*, a genuine reality to a meaningful extent. Scetis, the hub from which most of the sayings in the *Apophthegmata* arise, was located some forty miles south of Nitria, itself forty miles from Alexandria. It was so deep in the desert that one had to use the stars to navigate to it, other landmarks failing well in advance. The journey was genuinely hazardous and difficult; to make it required real purpose and dedication.¹⁴³ The journey was made, to be sure, by both monks and laypeople, and in both directions, but the separation was likewise real.

This genuine physical separation was reinforced by a number of more conceptual supports. We have already considered briefly the import of the concept of withdrawal and the idea of the “anchorite” and in more detail the fundamental nature of the division between the *monachoi* and the *kosmikoi*. Time and again in the *Apophthegmata*, the characters are introduced by a word that clearly marks them as belonging to one side or the other of this boundary. On the one hand, we hear about this abba or that monk, this *higoumen* or that anchorite, and on the other, visitors are *kosmikoi*, senators, officials, bishops, and so on. One is seldom in doubt as to whether any individual figure in the text belongs to the ascetic or secular world. This distinction in vocabulary, meanwhile, was bolstered by a geographical distinction unique to the Egyptian context. The strict boundary between the red land and the black land, the sandy wastes of the desert and the arable Nile flood plain, played a significant role in shaping monastic identity. The

¹⁴² The earliest occasion upon which term “*monachos*” was used to mean “monk” in the Christian sense, as it happens, presents a monk embedded in village affairs. E. A. Judge, “The earliest use of *monachos* for ‘monk’ (P. Coll. Youtie 77) and the origins of monasticism,” *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 20 (1977): 73-4. On connections between monks and the world, cf. James E. Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 39-52.

¹⁴³ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 173-4.

distinction between the inhabitable and the inhospitable, the living and the dead land is still today so sharp that in many places one can stand with one foot firmly in the desert and the other on a farm. With a concept of wilderness (“*erēmos*” in Greek, from which the word “hermit” derives) so powerfully fixed in the Egyptian mind from time immemorial, the decision to cross the boundary and dwell in even the nearest portions of the red land was a powerful ideological statement, and Scetis was well past the boundary.

This sharp conceptual distinction is reflected in the ways in which the monks spoke of “the Desert” on the one hand, and of “the world” on the other. Again, as noted above, return to “the world” was a byword for abandoning the ascetic life and dangerously jeopardizing one’s salvation. A story of Abba Sisoēs expresses the matter clearly. When Sisoēs had grown old, his disciple, Abba Abraham, suggested moving closer to human habitation. Sisoēs responded, “Let us go where there are no women.” Abraham replies, “And where is there a place that has no women, except for the Desert?” prompting Sisoēs to say, “Then take me to the Desert.”¹⁴⁴ At first, this appears to be a straightforward warning about the temptations that can arise from contact with women. However, the saying does not appear in chapter V, on *porneia*, but rather in chapter II, on *hēsychia*. This indicates that, for the editor of the Systematic Collection at least, the warning was of broader significance. The Desert is a place free from the distractions of women, to be sure, but also of all other distractions, women here standing in symbolically for temptation generally. Abba Doulas makes the same point in more general terms: “Cut off your relations with multitudes, lest your mind be filled with busy-ness and disturb the manner of your *hēsychia*.”¹⁴⁵ Even slight distractions were cause for genuine moral concern.

¹⁴⁴ Systematic Collection, II.26.

¹⁴⁵ Systematic Collection, II.14.

The worry about the distractions of the world and the need for maintaining a separate identity is likewise reflected in the concern that monks showed about going into town, even when the errand was entirely proper. Business did take the monks into the local villages, or even to Alexandria, from time to time. It was necessary to sell the various baskets and rugs they produced in their cells, and also to meet with ecclesiastical officials on various matters. The story of a priest who served the community at Scetis visiting the archbishop illustrates the theoretical ideal the monks held up for encounters with the world. Upon returning from Alexandria, the priest was asked by the brethren, “How is the city?” The priest replies, “Truly, brethren, I did not see the face of anyone except that of the archbishop.”¹⁴⁶ While it is certainly not the case that monks always kept their hoods low and stared at their feet until they met the person they were seeking in town, the story shows the attitude towards the cities that the community was seeking to cultivate. The Desert is the place without crowds, without women, without noise, the place where one can truly attend to the spiritual life. The city, by contrast, is a morally problematic, confusing, and ambiguous place, to be kept at arm’s length, even when one must be physically present in it. In this, we see that the idea of “renunciation”, one of the cornerstones of monastic conversion, extends beyond the laying aside of one’s physical possessions. It also involves renunciation of the rest of the world in its entirety, social as well as material. In Burton-Christie’s words, in their withdrawal the monks sought “a radical break with society and decision to take up a position on the margins of that society.”¹⁴⁷

As noted, in light of more recent scholarship, it is certain that this break was not always as radical as might have been portrayed. Monks and philosophers both were deeply embedded in

¹⁴⁶ Systematic Collection, IV.66.

¹⁴⁷ Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 56.

ecclesiastical and imperial structures of social and political power. Monks were frequent candidates for episcopal office, philosophers served as court advisors, and so on. What is relevant here is the ideal expressed in the program set out by the two communities. Regardless of how well they achieved it in practice, both the monks and the philosophers prized a genuine degree of distance between their communities and the rest of society. For all the caveats that are surely necessary, they appear to have achieved this distance to some degree, especially in the case of the more radically eremitic monks. Beyond this, even in their engagement with the world, a degree of withdrawal could still be maintained. Indeed, as Peter Brown has argued, it was precisely this measure of distance, of aloof impartiality, that served as the necessary condition for the social and political engagement for ascetics, establishing them as the only reliably objective mediators.¹⁴⁸ In both cases, then, conversion to the higher life involved a real measure of withdrawal from the world at large.

Entering the Teacher-Student Relationship

Withdrawal *from* any context necessarily presupposes withdrawal *to* another. To the extent that monks and philosophers made a calculated retreat from society at large, they equally entered into a new social structure, that of the monastic community or the philosophical school. This reality comports quite naturally with the findings of modern studies of conversion dynamics, as it happens. Ever since Lofland and Stark's paradigm-shifting article on Americans who joined the Unification Church, the role of social networks in both the recruitment and formation of converts has been a central feature of all conversion studies.¹⁴⁹ More recently,

¹⁴⁸ Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 91-2.

¹⁴⁹ Lofland and Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver", 871-4 discusses the role of strong affective bonds with Unification Church members and weak or distant bonds with non-members in making a convert and of extremely tight bonds in turning a convert into a totally-devoted member. Cf. Rambo and Farhadian's judgment that Lofland and Stark's article "began a new phase of conversion studies." Rambo and Farhadian, "Introduction," 6.

Kendra Eshleman has applied this framework to the world of ancient philosophy specifically, faulting “scholarship on conversion to philosophy in antiquity” for attending only to “the protreptic methods of philosophers and the emotional response of their recruits” while neglecting the social networks that impact the conversion process.¹⁵⁰ The entry into these new social networks of school or monastic community was mediated by the figure of the teacher, the relationship with whom would constitute one of (if not the) strongest affective bonds drawing the convert into the new community.

Choosing to become a philosopher or a monk was coextensive with the choice to enter into a teacher-student relationship. Neither community smiled upon freelancers pursuing a do-it-yourself approach. Beginning with the philosophical context, John Dillon’s observation of the fundamentally oral nature of Platonist formation is instructive:

As to the conditions of instruction and study, they were, I suggest, oral to a far greater degree than we generally seem to recognize. One learned one’s philosophy from one’s Master, as he had learned it in turn from his Master. With this Master one lived in close personal contact, sometimes staying in his house, often dining with him, sometimes marrying his daughter. Only after one’s views had been largely formed did one proceed to direct study of the original texts of Platonism.¹⁵¹

While there was a set curriculum of readings within the Platonist world, and likely in other schools as well – there are certainly parallels among the Epicureans, with the required

¹⁵⁰ Eshleman, “Affection and Affiliation”, 129-30. Eshleman’s entire article merits reading for its contributions to the study of the social dynamics of conversion to philosophy, and in particular for problematizing studies that have been too simplistic and ignorant of the sociological data. Some caution is in order, however, regarding her portrayal of affective bonds. Notably, and not uniquely among conversion studies that emphasize social networks, Eshleman runs the risk of making conversion to philosophy appear to be a primarily irrational act, grounded in affectivity rather than reason. This is not the only way to interpret the role of social networks, however. It is likewise possible to see the role of social bonds in conversion as reflecting a rational evaluation of the life of a committed adherent of a school of thought. A potential convert, upon getting to know a dedicated adherent, may well come to see in that person a balanced, well-ordered life, which serves as evidence for the soundness of the principles upon which that life is grounded. There is something more profound at work here than the language of affectivity alone conveys.

¹⁵¹ Dillon, “The Academy in the Middle Platonic Period”, 77. Cf. also Guy G. Stroumsa, “From Master of Wisdom to Spiritual Master in Late Antiquity,” in *Religion and the Self in Antiquity*, ed. David Brakke et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 188: “This conversion [to philosophy] entails not only the acceptance of new doctrines but also that of a strictly structured way of life, including alimentary and clothing rules, and the submission to a master.”

memorization of Epicurus' key concepts – these readings were secondary to the personal formation received at the feet of the master. What is more, the readings did not exist as an entity separated from the personal instruction. As Porphyry indicates in the *Life of Plotinus*, the classroom instruction was heavily centered around commentary on philosophical readings, showing the close connection between textual and personal learning.¹⁵² Asmis has noted a similar situation in Epicurean instruction: “The need for a guide is particularly urgent in the earliest stages. It is the task of the guide to make sure that the memorization of texts accomplishes its purpose of purifying the mind. Memorization and personal guidance thus form the twin pillars of Epicurean education.”¹⁵³ There can be no question, then, of a new convert simply picking up the key texts of his chosen philosophical tradition and shaping himself into a philosopher. The fundamentals of philosophical education were largely delivered orally, and textual study required oral instruction as well for full effect.

The centrality of the teaching relationship is confirmed in the biographical literature. As we saw when reviewing the moments of conversion, the decision to become a philosopher often coincided with the decision to follow a specific teacher. Plotinus began his philosophical quest by seeking a teacher, and did not make meaningful progress until he found Ammonius.¹⁵⁴ The early stages of Marinus' account of Proclus' philosophical career are largely devoted to the various teachers who had the greatest influence over him.¹⁵⁵ In Diogenes Laertius, Xenophon, Polemo, and Zeno all had dramatic encounters with specific philosophers (Socrates, Xenocrates, and Crates, respectively) that led them not only to commit to philosophy in general, but to these

¹⁵² Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 14.

¹⁵³ Asmis, “Basic Education in Epicureanism”, 216.

¹⁵⁴ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 3.

¹⁵⁵ Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, 9-12.

men in particular.¹⁵⁶ Additionally, only the very earliest philosophers in his narrative seem to spring up from nowhere, fully-formed as men of wisdom. The general pattern, however, is for each philosopher (regardless of school) to be defined first in terms of whose disciple he was and to conclude in part by mentioning any disciples he may have had, an approach largely followed by Eunapius of Sardis in his *Lives of the Philosophers*. These personal connections between master and disciple were fundamental to the formation and identity of every philosopher, and no aspiring philosopher was exempt from the system.

Among the monks of the Sayings tradition, the requirement was if anything more stringent. It should be noted at the outset that, in focusing on the *Apophthegmata*, we are dealing specifically with the eremitic tradition, rather than the cenobitic. The cenobitic communities certainly had forms of spiritual direction, some of which would involve high level of personal contact, but these operated in an institutional framework, giving them a different shape. Burton-Christie draws the distinction between the rule-based approach of cenobitic monasticism and “the eremitical world [which] relied largely upon a ‘pedagogy of spiritual direction,’ based on personal experience, and the exchanges of words between and elder and disciple.”¹⁵⁷ In studying the *Apophthegmata* specifically, we are concentrating upon a context in which this personal relationship was absolutely central. That centrality is emphasized again and again in the text, as various fathers insist upon the necessity of entering into the process of personal direction. We hear in one saying that “the elders said that God looks for nothing from beginners so much as

¹⁵⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, II.48, IV.16, and VII.3.

¹⁵⁷ Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 77. On a similar line, see the remark of Columba Stewart: “The guidance of a living spiritual teacher has always been regarded as indispensable to monastic initiation.” However there is also a textual element. Columba Stewart, “Evagrius Ponticus on Monastic Pedagogy,” in *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West, Festschrift for Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia*, ed. John Behr et al. (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 241.

vexation on account of obedience.”¹⁵⁸ There is no obedience without a master, of course, and so by extension there is nothing as necessary as having a teacher. Another, more colorful, story, illustrates the same point:

A certain brother, having withdrawn from the world and taken up the habit, immediately shut himself away, saying, ‘I am an anchorite.’ The elders, having heard, came and cast him out and compelled him to go around to the brothers’ cells, making repentance and saying, ‘Forgive me, for I am not an anchorite, but a beginner.’¹⁵⁹

The saying which immediately follows this one in the Systematic Collection encapsulates the idea succinctly: “If you see a young man climbing up to Heaven by his own will, take hold of his foot and pull him down from there, for it does him no good.”¹⁶⁰ In terms of the ideology, then, the abbas were adamant about the importance of the teaching relationship.

The descriptions used in the *Apophthegmata* likewise reflected this commitment. The compiler(s) of the *Apophthegmata* put together a very different sort of text from the anthologies of Diogenes Laertius and Eunapius, and so the format they followed, of beginning many entries with descriptions of the subject’s teachers and concluding them with the subject’s own disciples, was not available. Nevertheless, the underlying principle remained operative. On a variety of occasions, figures are introduced to the reader in terms of whose disciple they are. For example, there is “the blessed Abba Paul the Simple, the disciple of Abba Antony,”¹⁶¹ “the disciple of Abba Silvanus, Zachariah,”¹⁶² and “Abba Natras, the disciple of Abba Silvanus”.¹⁶³ Likewise, many stories of monastic conversion lead directly to stories about the beginning of monastic spiritual direction. The beginning of John Colobos’ career is described as follows: “having

¹⁵⁸ Systematic Collection, XIV.24.

¹⁵⁹ Systematic Collection, X.172.

¹⁶⁰ Systematic Collection, X.173.

¹⁶¹ Systematic Collection, XVIII.26.

¹⁶² Systematic Collection, XVIII.27.

¹⁶³ Systematic Collection, X.50.

retreated to a Theban elder at Scetis, he was dwelling in the Desert,”¹⁶⁴ and the Manichaean presbyter converted to Christian orthodoxy by a monk’s hospitality also immediately became that same monk’s disciple.¹⁶⁵ A monk was defined at a fundamental level, then, by the chain of personal authority to which he belonged, and his ascetic conversion was all but synonymous with his entrance into a teacher-student relationship.

In both contexts, there was no question of free-lance spiritual development. No would-be philosopher who had simply read Plato or Epicurus in private, without sitting at the feet of a master, could expect to be taken seriously in the schools of Athens or Alexandria. As for a monk who set out upon such an independent path in Scetis, we have seen how he could expect to be confronted. In both cases, conversion is a social process, and the teacher mediates the entry into the new community. The teaching relationship was not just an option, and, more importantly, it was not simply mandatory by accident. It was constitutive of the entire enterprise of spiritual growth. Without it, philosophy and monasticism would have been fundamentally different enterprises from what they were, as the following chapter will demonstrate.

Conclusion

By laying out the basic dynamics of this conversion, we can better understand what it meant to set out on the monastic and philosophical paths. While “conversion” initially seemed too religious a concept to attach to philosophy, investigation has shown that the religious nature of ancient philosophy renders the framework entirely appropriate. The entry point for each way of life was similar in many ways. In each case, there is a turn from an earlier identity within a broad religious/cultural tradition to a specific, elite spiritual path within that tradition. This turn

¹⁶⁴ Systematic Collection, XIV.4.

¹⁶⁵ Systematic Collection, XIII.12.

formed the dividing line in the life of the monk and the philosopher, a line reflected in both attitudes and vocabulary used to describe the new communities. Both conversions were characterized by a corresponding withdrawal from society at large, variously manifested in physical, political, or religious terms. This withdrawal turned out to necessarily mean also an entry into a new community, an entry presided over by the teacher. The close parallels between monastic spiritual formation and philosophical psychagogy begun in conversion deepened in the teaching relationship, as the investigation of that relationship in the next chapter will illustrate.

CHAPTER TWO: MONASTIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL FORMATION

Introduction

The life of the newly-converted monk and the philosopher in the ancient world began in the context of a pedagogical relationship. This relationship and the personal formation that was effected through it wrought a transformation upon the junior partner, turning him (or her, although these cases are much less discussed in the primary sources) from a member of a cultural and religious community at large into someone committed to a totalizing spiritual path, a commitment above and beyond what was expected of an ordinary pagan or a lay Christian. The convert must now be formed in the way of life of his new community. If we wish to understand the ways in which Christian monks drew upon the practices of philosophical communities in their personal, spiritual, and literary lives, the process of formation cannot be ignored. The teacher/student, master/disciple relationship is the foundation of the entire philosophical life, and of the monastic life as well. The teacher would convey doctrinal truths, spiritual techniques,¹ practical necessities for daily life, methods for moral improvement, and more. No aspect of the spiritual life in antiquity was untouched by the relationship between master and disciple, and for this reason it must be a focal point.

As this chapter progresses, a wide variety of points of contact between philosophical and monastic pedagogy will emerge, and we will see that these points of contact can be best understood within the framework of the Christian use of ancient philosophy discussed in the introduction. We have already seen that the pedagogical relationship is required of all who enter upon either of these spiritual paths. This relationship is therapeutic in nature and it is always a

¹ This aspect will be the subject of the third chapter of this dissertation, covering spiritual exercises in ancient philosophy and Christian monasticism.

personal relationship. The methodological foundations of the relationship are unsparing frank speech on the part of the master and a radical openness to the teacher on the part of the disciple. This combination of openness and frankness paves the way for the instruction to be responsive to the particular situation, a characteristic that distinguishes this pedagogical path from other forms of education and instruction in the Late Ancient world. While there remain some enduring differences, the points of contact are not only more numerous, but are at least as fundamental as the differences, and in some senses more so. For this reason, it is most reasonable to see the early monks as drawing upon the resources of one of the major traditions of spiritual formation available in their cultural context. As the monks of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* set out to live their own understanding of the “philosophical life”, they formed their disciples in ways consistent with that objective.

The Nature of the Relationship between Teacher and Disciple

The pedagogical relationship demanded by conversion to either the monastic or the philosophical life was an immediate consequence of conversion that rivaled all others in its impact upon the life of the new adherent. In all the sources we have, the beginnings of either of these spiritual paths were shaped primarily by the relationship between the new convert, that is, the disciple, and an experienced, often older, member of the community, that is, the teacher. Through this close partnership, the disciple would learn what it meant to live as a member of the community. Two aspects of this relationship stand out in particular and merit further analysis. First, the relationship was specifically therapeutic. While there was a doctrinal element to the teaching process, especially in philosophy, and practical factors were also important, the objective of healing the soul of its various passions and troubles was central to the mission of the instructor. Second, the relationship was intended to be a personal one in both contexts. The

master knew his disciple(s) well, often sharing living space, meals, and worship with those under his care. Our examination of the dynamics of teaching in ancient philosophy and the *Apophthegmata* will be centered around these two central elements: a relationship that was therapeutic and personal.

Therapeutic

The first of the two major characteristics of the teacher/student relationship under investigation here is the therapeutic element. The term “therapeutic” means aimed at the healing of the human person, the human soul. This stands in contrast to other forms of education in Antiquity. Apprenticeships functioned to teach a trade. Early literate education taught skills of reading and writing and provided access to the high literature that mediated the corridors of cultural and political influence. Rhetorical education took this process to a higher level, and paved the way for high-level public careers. Philosophical formation, and in different ways monastic as well, also taught particular skills, skills that would be useful in supporting oneself and gaining advancement. The fundamental orientation of these two paths of formation, however, pointed in a different direction. The object was not to fill the heads of students with doctrines and arguments. Rather, it was to diagnose and treat their souls. If there was one principle upon which the monks and philosophers could agree, it was that humanity (or at least the great majority) was suffering from some serious problem, some profound disconnect between their lives and the nature of reality, and this disconnect caused immoral actions and personal suffering. Both geared their entire pedagogical enterprises towards the treatment of these problems.

In philosophy, this principle is best expressed through a fragmentary saying of Epicurus. Illustrating the orientation of his philosophy towards safeguarding pleasure and avoiding pain,

Epicurus declares, “Empty is the discourse of that philosopher by which no human suffering is treated. For just as there is no benefit from medicine if it does not cast out the diseases of bodies, neither is there from philosophy if it does not cast out suffering from the soul.”² The broad appeal of this sentiment within ancient philosophy is evident from Porphyry’s approving citation of this passage (unattributed, of course) in his *Letter to Marcella*,³ a letter itself largely concerned with the practical application of philosophy, rather than dialectical argumentation. It is difficult to envision two ancient philosophers who diverged more in their metaphysics, their social situation, or their political context than Epicurus and Porphyry. Further, the two would offer profoundly different prescriptions for how to achieve the *therapeia* of the human soul through philosophy. Nevertheless, they both were part of a common project, however different their approaches.

Continuing with the Epicureans, we can identify the therapeutic orientation of philosophy in their concentration upon removing mental and physical disturbance of any sort, and (critically) from anyone. While philosophy was always primarily an elite activity in the ancient world, the Epicureans aimed, at least on an ideological level, to make their doctrines and practices available more widely. They aimed at creating a community which would be open to anyone willing to learn, anyone who was interested in the treatment of their soul.⁴ This openness is reflected in what was required to be an Epicurean philosopher. To be part of the community, it was not necessary to have mastered all the various arguments behind the doctrines or to press on to new frontiers of Epicurean thought. Rather, the expectation was to practice the teachings of “Epicurus, according to whom we have chosen to live.”⁵

² Epicurus, Usener fr. 221.

³ Porphyry, *Letter to Marcella*, 31.

⁴ Asmis, “Basic Education in Epicureanism”, 209.

⁵ Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, fr. 45.

The authority of these teachings was derived precisely from their ability to treat human suffering. The primary grounding of Epicurean “atheism” (as we have seen, this meant the total detachment of the gods from this world) was not so much any metaphysical or theological conviction, but rather a sense that many people spend a lot of time mentally distressed over the gods. People offer prayers and sacrifices, they try to please the gods (who may be angry for reasons almost impossible to discern), they travel from one temple to the next, trying to find a god who can offer them help. How much better, Epicurus reasoned, to simply pitch the whole enterprise overboard and be at peace, instead of constantly trembling in fear of the unpredictable wrath of the gods. The same principle can be found in other areas of Epicurean teaching. They encouraged a moderate hedonism rather than the orgiastic displays often associated with that term for the reason that, as pleasurable as a night of drunken revelry may be, the vomiting and hangovers go just as far in the other direction the next day. Again, Epicurean doctrines of annihilation at death were geared not just to answer a difficult question, but to take away the fear almost everyone feels at confronting their mortality. By treating death as something that “is nothing to us,”⁶ Epicurus aimed to cure human fear (and thus pain, at a mental level) of the end of life. The entirety of Epicurean philosophy was oriented deliberately toward a therapeutic program.

This orientation of Epicurean philosophy was reflected in how the teaching relationship functioned. First, the teacher imparted these and other doctrines, which were themselves therapeutic. Second, the teacher would have been the one to introduce the new convert to the practice of the spiritual exercises that will be discussed in the next chapter (a key element of the therapeutic nature of all philosophical teaching, not only that of the Garden). Finally, much of

⁶ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 124.

what is known about the teaching methodology of the Epicurean school had a specifically therapeutic aim. The practice of frank speech, aimed at exposing and correcting destructive and unvirtuous behaviors, is a prime example along these lines. The new Epicurean put himself under the authority of a teacher not simply to learn information, but to have his soul healed.

Stoicism likewise had a profound therapeutic emphasis, as is evident from the heavy emphasis upon ethics in Stoic thought (an emphasis which also marked the greater part of their legacy in the Neoplatonic synthesis). Stoic philosophy certainly had an understanding of physics and metaphysics and entertained extensive discourses about the finer points of interpretation on these matters. Nevertheless, the vital element was always the question of human freedom, what is “up to us”. Much of Stoic thought is devoted to carefully delimiting these boundaries, not just in the abstract, but in order to provide the individual practitioner with the necessary information for behaving in a proper way. Studying the content of these injunctions and principles was not enough, practice was necessary. As Long notes, “Epictetus’ students require rigorous training in managing their day-to-day lives even after they have absorbed the truths about reconciling their desires and aversions with long-term freedom and tranquility.”⁷ Stoicism’s effort to ensure a morally upright life for its adherents did not end once the propositional content of its doctrines had been communicated. Unlike a modern philosophy course, the ability to pass an examination did not suffice to demonstrate a student’s philosophical competence. Enacting the principles in life was what counted, and that required careful and repeated consultation with a teacher.

Platonism might well appear to some as the exception to this rule of the therapeutic nature of philosophy. Martha Nussbaum for one has argued along these lines, albeit rather

⁷ Long, *Epictetus*, 116.

confusedly.⁸ There is a kind of *prima facie* plausibility to this claim, as one can peruse the works of Plotinus for a considerable time without coming upon any texts that are obviously aimed at treating the suffering of the soul, for they are actively engaged in debates about how Intellect proceeds from the One or how the soul is related to the body. Nevertheless, as we saw above, no less prominent a Platonist than Porphyry approved of Epicurus' saying that a non-therapeutic discourse would be "empty." As Plotinus' editor, Porphyry certainly did not find his discourse empty. It therefore follows that he must have found it therapeutic. This is further reflected in Porphyry's own account of his relationship with Plotinus. Plotinus noticed Porphyry contemplating suicide at one point and urged him to reconsider, arguing that he was suffering from a medical problem, not making a rational philosophical decision. The vacation Porphyry took as a result of Plotinus' urging prevented him from being present at his teacher's own death, but did seem to achieve its purpose, and in any event illustrates Plotinus' concern for his students' whole lives, not just their intellectual capacities.⁹ Porphyry himself followed in his teacher's footsteps in this regard, taking account of the entirety of the life of those around him, not only their academic progress. His letter to his wife Marcella illustrates this point admirably. The letter is an extended exhortation to philosophy, but contains relatively little material on philosophical doctrine. Instead, Porphyry concentrates upon the philosophical life. He begins by reflecting on how previously "I called you [Marcella] to my own way of life, giving you a share of philosophy and showing a discourse in conformity with life."¹⁰ He continues this exhortation

⁸ Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 17-20. See chapter 3 of this dissertation for a discussion of Nussbaum's rejection of a therapeutic understanding of Platonic philosophy.

⁹ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 11. Eunapius of Sardis records a somewhat confused version of this same story, indicating the value it held as emblematic of proper Platonic teaching. Eunapius of Sardis, *Lives of the Philosophers*, 456. Dillon re-affirms this element of the teacher's responsibilities, noting that the teacher would encourage things like moderate eating as well as doling out punishment for failures. Dillon, "The Academy in the Middle Platonic Period", 67.

¹⁰ Porphyry, *Letter to Marcella*, 3.

in the letter, urging her to “throw [yourself] upon philosophy” and to make use of difficult conditions as “training in the sort of life you expect to lead,” rather than being overwhelmed by them.¹¹ The philosopher explains his emphasis on practical, ethical concerns in the following terms: “For it is the nature of deeds to furnish proofs of each person’s beliefs”, and “it is necessary that whoever has believed must live in such a manner that he may himself be a trustworthy witness to the things he says to his disciples.”¹² Porphyry, who was the recipient of ethical, spiritual formation from his master, Plotinus, sought in turn to provide similar guidance to those around him.

This ethical commitment is found in many other Platonist contexts. According to Alcinous, not only must the prospective philosopher be intellectually capable and “in love [*echein erōtikōs*] with the truth,” willing “in no way to accept falsehood,” but he must also, “be temperate by nature, and, as far as the passionate part of the soul is concerned, be naturally restrained. For the one who aims at studies of being and turns his longing toward these things would not admire the pleasures.”¹³ The teacher Aedesius, meanwhile, is said by Eunapius to have offered his own virtue as proof of the value of philosophical learning.¹⁴ Even as late as Damascius, the philosopher’s role as moral instructor was prominent. Taking Damascius’ portrayal of one Theosebius, “the Epictetus of our time,” as an example, we hear how he was “able to persuade and shame those who were hard-hearted and stubborn in their souls, and they turned away and fled from worse forms of life according to their ability, and embraced and pursued the better.”¹⁵ Theosebius appears to have been an Epictetus *redivivus* in a rather

¹¹ Porphyry, *Letter to Marcella*, 5.

¹² Porphyry, *Letter to Marcella*, 8.

¹³ Alcinous, *The Handbook of Platonism*, 1.

¹⁴ Eunapius of Sardis, *Lives of the Philosophers*, 461. Virtue as a philosophical advertisement is not uncommon in Eunapius or Diogenes Laertius.

¹⁵ Damascius, *Philosophical History*, 46.

concrete sense when we examine other late Platonic literature. Simplicius, a student of Damascius, composed a commentary on Epictetus' *Encheiridion* in which he praised exactly this method of illustrating ethical points with concrete examples.¹⁶ This implies that both the importance and some of the methods of moral instruction were well-known among at least a certain set of late Neoplatonists. The vital role played by moral character is further underscored elsewhere, when Damascius mentions individuals who were not especially clever, but were able to make progress in philosophy (and, of course, merit a place in his narrative) through their diligence alone.¹⁷ Indeed, throughout Damascius' entire work the importance of ethical virtue is paramount. In almost every case, Damascius makes a comment about each figure's intellectual capacities, but this comment is rarely definitive of their success as a philosopher. While intellect was one trait among many, failure of moral virtue could single-handedly disqualify a person from being admitted to the ranks of the philosophers. Of one Domninus, Damascius writes that, "in his way of life he did not reach the heights such that one could truly call him a philosopher."¹⁸ Similarly, he describes how Proclus once turned away a potential pupil on the grounds that he had concubines, was gluttonous, and generally speaking led a hedonistic life.¹⁹

The ethical dimension of Platonist philosophy (and, specifically, of Platonist *teaching*), would seem to be firmly established, present as it is over a period of centuries and in decidedly different contexts. It is important to note, in this regard, that virtue did not comprise some sort of add-on to Platonist thinking, something encouraged, and perhaps necessary to persevere through a difficult course of study, but distinct from the real heart of Platonic philosophy proper. Rather,

¹⁶ Simplicius, *Commentary on the Encheiridion* 83.12. For commentary, see Edward Watts, "Doctrine, Anecdote, and Action: Reconsidering the Social History of the Last Platonists (c. 430–c. 550 C.E.)," *Classical Philology* vol. 106, no. 3 (July 2011): 235-7.

¹⁷ Damascius, *Philosophical History*, 61-2.

¹⁸ Damascius, *Philosophical History*, 89.

¹⁹ Damascius, *Philosophical History*, 91.

virtue was an essential, indispensable component of the entire Platonist project. We must bear in mind the observations made above, in the discussion of theosis. The goal of Platonic philosophy was not to know a great deal about Soul, Intellect, and the One. It was to ascend through purification and introspection to higher levels of reality, and ultimately to that One which lies beyond being, the ground upon which reality stands. So far as possible, man is to be made like this divinity, and in so doing the soul will be healed. It is to examine the role of the different virtues, operating at different levels of spiritual progress, that Plotinus undertakes his analysis of the “scale of virtues”.²⁰ There is no journey to union with the One without virtue, and not just an intellectual grasp of virtue, but its actual practice, starting with the most mundane of contexts. Thus there can be no question of an untherapeutic Platonism. As with all philosophies, Platonism begins with a diagnosis of what ails the soul. Where Epicureanism discovers pain, Skepticism discovers mental disturbance, and Stoicism discovers vice, Platonism discovers alienation from the true end of the soul in the Good. The prescriptions differ as widely as the diagnoses (moderate pleasure, a belief-free life, moral virtue, and the ascent to the One, respectively), but in each case the soul is found in trouble and shown a path toward healing. What is more, this path is mediated through the teacher-student relationship. There is no free-lance Epicureanism, no do-it-yourself Platonism, no self-help Stoicism in the ancient world. It is the role of the teacher to instruct the convert in both the diagnosis and the proper treatment, and in this respect the relationship between the two is intrinsically therapeutic.

The monasticism of the *Apophthegmata* (and the pedagogical relationship at its heart) is likewise deeply marked by a therapeutic orientation. Monastic conversions often began, as

²⁰ Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.2 (“On Virtues”). Cf. Armstrong’s comment: the treatise’s “object is to determine in what precise sense the virtue can be said to make us godlike.” Armstrong, *Plotinus: Porphyry on Plotinus, Ennead I*, 124. Plotinus is no outlier in the Platonic tradition here. On his theory alongside later developments in Porphyry, Iamblichus, and beyond, see O’Meara, *Platonopolis*, 40-9.

noted, with a desire to save one's soul, and many of the Sayings begin with a monk asking for a word so that he might be saved. From the beginning, there is an assumption of something wrong, some disorder in the convert, paired with a conviction that following a monastic path at the feet of an experienced abba will lead to treatment of the problem(s) at hand. It is for this reason that so much of the material in the *Apophthegmata* centers around gaining mastery over the unruly passions, a mastery that will in turn facilitate the restoration of proper relationships with one's neighbors and with God. This concern for salvation through treatment of the passions gave rise to what Burton-Christie calls a "practical ethos" which "permeated the desert monks' spirituality. We can see this in the urgent and practical character of the questions raised by the monks."²¹ This "practical ethos" shaped a monastic discourse focused on addressing concrete problems.²² This discourse included not only matters pertaining to the spiritual life in an obvious way (how to pray, how to avoid certain sins, etc.), but also the day-to-day details of getting by in the Desert. An elder might give a novice financial advice (which might well amount to "avoid finances entirely").²³ Elsewhere, a story about Macarius that ends in a miraculous vision begins in as unassuming a manner as possible: two novices wanted to learn Desert life from the great elder. He gave them an axe, some bread and some salt, and showed them where to quarry stone in order to build a cell. Then, upon being asked what work the monks do, Macarius took "palm leaves from the marsh" and "showed them the principles of rope making and how one must sew."²⁴ These apparently mundane elements were seen to have real import for the spiritual life. For this reason, one elder even indicated that braiding rope without being distracted was the way

²¹ Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 150.

²² Jeremy Driscoll, trans., *Evagrius Ponticus: Ad Monachos* (Mahwah: The Newman Press, 2003), 180-1 notes that significance of such practical concerns in monastic Scriptural interpretation.

²³ Systematic Collection, VI.26.

²⁴ Systematic Collection, XX.3.

to salvation.²⁵ Harmless aptly sums up the approach of Desert discourse: “There is no theorizing, no trains of logical argument, no intricate analysis of biblical texts. Their exchanges focus on the specifics of desert living and the spiritual quest.”²⁶

Looking ahead to the next feature of the teaching relationship under consideration here, we might take a moment to emphasize that, while the relationship was *personal*, and indeed intensely so, it was not a *friendly* relationship per se. While genuine affection might well comprise a part of the bond between a master and his student, there was always also a certain distance between the two, and not solely that of age or rank. The relationship was never to be an end in itself, but was rather a means for achieving practical, therapeutic goals. It is in this context that Abba Ammos was said to compel his disciple to walk some ways behind him on the way to church, and even when he came to discuss a *logismos*, he would not let the student stay long. Ammos explained himself in this way: “It is in case, while we are speaking about what is profitable, some foreign conversation should creep in that I do not permit you to spend much time close to me.”²⁷ Abba Moses reiterates this principle in consecutive sayings, first exhorting the reader to “flee from free talk,” and then again exclaiming, “let us flee from free talk, the mother of evils.”²⁸ The danger of too much familiarity is not to be underestimated: “Free talk and laughter are like fire burning up straw.”²⁹ A variety of problems can arise from

²⁵ Systematic Collection, XXI.6.

²⁶ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 171. Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, in a similar vein, are right to emphasize the comprehensive nature of this discourse. “Spiritual direction is not simply a practice determined first and foremost by the confession of sins but a religious and pedagogical experience that should command the whole life of man.” Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony and Aryeh Kofsky, ed.s, *Christian Gaza in Late Antiquity* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 145.

²⁷ Systematic Collection, XI.11.

²⁸ Systematic Collection, XI.53-4.

²⁹ Systematic Collection, XXI.37. The word translated in these three sayings as “free talk” is “*parrēsia*”, which, as we shall soon see, is elsewhere extolled as an important virtue. The sense of the word here is conversation that has become loose, not attentive to the moral weight of the moment (hence why the first to come from the chapter on vigilance). Elsewhere, the same term can cover the ability to speak openly to someone else about what is necessary, without fear of embarrassment or reprisal – an essential virtue for spiritual guidance.

excessive familiarity amongst ascetics, but chief among them is distraction. A monk's visit to his elder is to be spent in careful examination of the *logismoi*, not in chit-chat, however pleasant. Trips to church were for the divine worship and reception of the healing sacred mysteries, not for a morning stroll with a friend. If enjoyment of the other's company took on too big a role, then opportunities for rigorous ascetic training would be lost. Just as a modern person at the gym (might we call it an "*askētērion*"?) does not gossip with a personal trainer in the middle of an exercise, it would be inappropriate to while away the hours chatting with one's abba. While there was room for relaxation, this was minimal, occasional, and accepted for the purpose of allowing the monks an opportunity to recuperate a little from the rigors of harsh Desert life, then, refreshed, return to vigorous training.³⁰ The master/disciple relationship among the monks was practical, and therefore therapeutic, just as it was among the philosophers. The personal (though again, for the monks, not quite friendly) nature of that relationship served to extend rather than mitigate this practicality.

Personal

This observation leads naturally into the consideration of the second major characteristic of the teaching relationship in philosophy and monasticism, namely the fact that it was a personal relationship. This element is vital in its own right, and also provides an essential part of the foundation for the case sensitive methodology discussed below. The personal element of pedagogy was an important component of other educational stages and paths. In rhetorical education, Libanius' copious correspondence, including using his name and connections to intercede on his students' behalf, provides a well-documented example.³¹ In philosophical and

³⁰ Systematic Collection, X.3.

³¹ Cf. Rafaella Cribiore, *The School of Libanius in Late Antique Antioch* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 213-22. One could also point to a number of the stories in Philostratus that illustrate the relationships between teachers and their students.

monastic pedagogy, however, it takes on a particularly central role. The space for direct interaction between the teacher and individuals or small groups would furnish the teacher with the opportunity to gain a firm grasp of what troubled each student and how best to approach his formation, without which neither frank speech nor case sensitive approaches would be possible. The personal touch, then, was not an extra element of such teaching, but a central pillar of the entire method.

The first marker of the importance of the personal relationship in ancient philosophy can be found in the value attached to chains of succession. We have seen already how the authors of two major collections of philosophical biographies, Diogenes Laertius and Eunapius of Sardis, defined their subjects first in terms of who their teachers were, and concluded with records of their most significant disciples. Similar phenomena occur elsewhere with sufficient regularity to rise to the level of convention.³² This idea of a succession was especially important for the Neoplatonists, who were fond of speaking of a “Golden Chain.” Edwards elaborates:

All philosophers were assumed in late antiquity to have passed on their authentic teaching through successors or *diadochi*. Teachers at the Athenian ‘Academy’ claimed unbroken descent from Plato, although Dillon (1979) contends that from Antiochus of Ascalon (fl. 86 B.C.) to the establishment of an official chair in the late second century, teaching in Athens may have been series of ‘one-man shows’.³³

As Edwards (via Dillon) indicates, the existence of a literal Golden Chain is implausible. The image can be better understood as a metaphor representing the faithful handing on of truth over

³² Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints*, 55, n. 4. This point is underscored by Goulet’s statistical survey of the evidence regarding ancient philosophers: “One of the most common features of this population [i.e. all known mentions of ancient philosophers] is that a philosopher is generally known along with his teacher. We know the teachers of at least 783 philosophers (31.79%). This may suggest that philosophy was not an individual undertaking, and that producing fresh and original views was generally not the aim of most of these thinkers. Philosophy was a heritage, a diadochè, and, at least in the golden era of the great Athenian schools, philosophical affiliation was the general rule.” Richard Goulet, “Ancient Philosophers: A First Statistical Survey,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancients and Moderns: Essays in Honor of Pierre Hadot*, ed. Michael Chase et al. (Malden, MA, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 35. He goes on to make a similar observation regarding philosophers being known in terms of their students. Ibid.

³³ Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints*, 27, n. 149.

the centuries.³⁴ Metaphorical though the image surely is, it is not accidental. It is significant that the image chosen to convey the faithfulness of the Neoplatonic communities to the philosophy of Plato himself is one based upon personal connections. Other symbols could have been used, focused perhaps upon the Golden Words of Plato or the Golden Halls of the Academy, but the Neoplatonists chose the model of a chain, and specifically a chain of personal succession, to express their continuity with their founder. In the ancient world the only legitimate way to learn philosophy was in person, from a master, and so the only way to express the legitimacy of the present masters was in terms of their masters, their masters' masters, and so on. While this reached a high point of emphasis (and rhetorical flourish) in Neoplatonism, it was a critical element in all the schools.

The centrality of personal connections to ancient philosophy is further underscored by the structure of the schools themselves. For much of the Ancient period, there is little evidence of large-scale institutions of philosophical teaching. Rather, individual philosophers would hang out their proverbial shingle and hope to gather a circle of followers.³⁵ In some areas (Athens and Alexandria being notable among them), a number of such teachers might congregate, leading to a dynamic atmosphere of discussion between the various thinkers, and between their students as well. Certainly the testimony in the *Life of Plotinus* about debates, treatises received, and students commissioned to issue responses speaks to this type of intellectual atmosphere. Nevertheless, Plotinus operated on his own, not as part of some larger school or proto-university, and there is good reason to think that he is, in this respect, normative. Dillon observes that the

³⁴ Lucas Siorvanes, *Proclus: Neo-Platonic Philosophy and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 21.

³⁵ Stroumsa emphasizes this point: "Up to late Neoplatonism, the philosophical schools do not really have fixed structures. It is less a matter of buildings and institutions than of persons. If the master disappears, everything collapses. It is the relationships between master and student that creates the school, through teaching and learning, model and following." Stroumsa, "From Master of Wisdom to Spiritual Master in Late Antiquity", 189.

“glimpses of academic life” in Aulus Gellius (2nd century) “reveal ... not a full-scale Academy, but rather a one-man show.”³⁶ Speaking more broadly, Dillon holds that “as far as one can see, one simply presented oneself at the house of the master of one’s choice and hoped to be allowed to enter his circle.”³⁷ Within such a circle, there was little enough in the way of formal structure beyond the lectures themselves.³⁸

The lecture, however, was vital. Continuing with Dillon for another moment, he reminds us of the primacy of the oral in ancient philosophical teaching, a fact easily forgotten in so textual an age as our own. “We must bear in mind that instruction in philosophy, as in most other disciplines, in ancient times was primarily oral. One learned one’s Platonism, for instance, at the feet of a master, and only secondarily, and under his guidance, turned to a study of Plato’s works.”³⁹ The centrality of oral teaching, which frequently involved commentary on texts, but also might include moral exhortation, instructive anecdotes,⁴⁰ and more, was such that many philosophers felt no obligation to even attempt to pass down their own teachings in written form. As we hear from Longinus, via Porphyry, some philosophers “felt it was sufficient to lead those with them to the apprehension of the things they held.” Even among those who did write, many made no effort to produce any major new developments, preferring only to hand on the doctrines of their predecessors.⁴¹ Plotinus’ own teacher, Ammonius Saccas, appears to have been in this category, having left behind no trace in history beyond what others learned from him directly. Some element of this attitude persisted quite late, as it happens. Damascius speaks of someone

³⁶ Dillon, “The Academy in the Middle Platonic Period”, 69.

³⁷ Dillon, “The Academy in the Middle Platonic Period”, 73.

³⁸ Dillon, “The Academy in the Middle Platonic Period”, 74.

³⁹ Dillon, *Alcinous*, xiv.

⁴⁰ Porphyry’s account of how Plotinus regularly held up Rogatianus as an example of the successful practice of philosophy is one such instance. Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 7.

⁴¹ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 20. Cf. Goulet, “Ancient Philosophers: A First Statistical Survey”, 37, on some philosophers deliberately avoiding literary activity.

in his *Philosophical History* who had no use for any writings beyond a record of his master's oral teaching: "He avoided the din of books, as the cause of many opinions rather than of much understanding. Having settled on one teacher, he modelled himself on that one alone, writing down the things he said."⁴² As difficult as it may be to imagine a philosopher (or an academic of any sort) who found the "din of books" anything other than a delight, in the ancient world it was rather the steady hand of the teacher that controlled the cacophony of voices emanating from diverse written works.

The physical proximity required for oral teaching led naturally to a strong connection between the students and the teacher. On the one hand, students were often fiercely loyal to one teacher only, or perhaps to a small group. Damascius' opponent of babbling books we have already seen; there is also the famous case of Plotinus' philosophical quest, which ended in the formation of a permanent attachment to Ammonius Saccas. Porphyry, in turn, found similar fulfilment by attaching himself to Plotinus, becoming one of his "closest companions,"⁴³ and it appears from Porphyry's *Vita* that Plotinus' other students might also have been attached to him alone. Reaching further into antiquity, Diogenes Laertius states that Aeschines spent all of his time in the presence of Socrates,⁴⁴ and, operating on a similar model with a different philosophical founder, Metrodorus, after meeting Epicurus, never left him again until death, save for one six month period.⁴⁵ This corresponds well with what we know of Epicurus, who seems to have founded his "school" as a small group of disciple-friends.⁴⁶

⁴² Damascius, *Philosophical History*, 35.

⁴³ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 7.

⁴⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, II.60.

⁴⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, X.22-3.

⁴⁶ M. L. Clarke, *Higher Education in the Ancient World* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971), 62-3. As Clarke goes on to say, "Epicurus's school differed somewhat from the older schools. It was essentially a community." Ibid, 69. To what extent the other schools were not communities in a real sense is not entirely clear, but the appellation certainly applies to the Garden.

Among the most striking examples of the close personal ties that could develop in a philosophical community is Marinus' description of the Athenian circle that Proclus entered. Perhaps brought closer together by growing Christian pressure, compared to earlier groups, it was a tightly-bound circle, not just of intellectual colleagues, but men who shared their lives in a profound way. One of Proclus' teachers, a man named Hero, is said to have "entrusted to him the entire manner of his own piety, and constantly made him share his hearth."⁴⁷ Similar terms are used to describe Proclus' relationship with another teacher, Plutarch: "Having had experience of the young man [Proclus] and his aptitude for noble things, he [Plutarch] also rejoiced in him; he always called him 'son' and made him share his hearth."⁴⁸ This kind of familial intimacy was not unique to Proclus and Plutarch. Synesius of Cyrene described his teacher Hypatia as a mother,⁴⁹ the Pseudo-Platonic *Theages* invokes the idea of the philosopher as a father,⁵⁰ and more than one philosopher was buried with his teacher.⁵¹ The teacher Olympiodorus wished to turn familial language into reality, desiring that Proclus marry his daughter, "whom he was also bringing up philosophically."⁵² Although the exact details vary and we are compelled to build upon some rather limited and disparate evidence (in particular, evidence tends to be centered around leading lights and star pupils, as they were most worthy of biographical commemoration), the convergence is nevertheless striking. Whether we are thinking of Socrates in Athens, Epicureans in the Garden, theurgists in the last days of paganism, or any other

⁴⁷ Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, 9.

⁴⁸ Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, 12.

⁴⁹ Synesius, *Letter* 16.

⁵⁰ Ps.-Plato, *Theages*, 127b-c.

⁵¹ Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, 36 and Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IV.21. For analysis of the citations in this sentence, see Watts, "Doctrine, Anecdote, and Action", 231-3.

⁵² Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, 9.

philosophical context, the philosophical student is bound in a close personal relationship with the teacher.

The evidence for these particular close relationships is buttressed by the fact that there is good reason to believe that, apart from rising stars like Proclus, a measure of common life was normative in philosophical schools. While many schools had significant communal elements, such as meals together, ritual practices (celebrations of philosophers' birthdays, etc.), and so on, the Epicureans were preeminent in this regard. It has often been thought that some Epicureans lived together (or at least close by), and in any event they certainly placed a value on friendship unsurpassed by any other philosophical sect.⁵³ Clay goes so far as to suggest that conceiving of the Epicurean community as a "school" may be a little misleading: "Epicurus' Garden was not a school. Seneca had it right when he commented: 'it was not the school of Epicurus that made Metrodorus, Hermarchus and Polyaeus great men but their shared life' (Ep. 1.6.6). *Non schola sed contubernium*."⁵⁴ That the Garden's common life garnered the respect of a stern Stoic like Seneca is particularly striking, given the opposition between Epicurean hedonism and Stoic moralism. Striking though this observation might be, it supports the idea that life in common was a feature of many schools. While a Stoic would not be likely to look to an Epicurean source for inspiration on matters of metaphysics, reinforcement of the ideals of practical ethics might well cross boundaries, and Seneca at least seems to have found some ideal worth pursuing in the Epicurean communal life.⁵⁵ Among the Platonists, Plotinus provides a well-known example of a teacher operating a two-level school, comprised of an outer circle of interested listeners who

⁵³ Clarke, *Higher Education in the Ancient World*, 69.

⁵⁴ Clay, "The Athenian Garden", 26.

⁵⁵ Ilsetraut Hadot argues that this was not mere admiration from afar, but also the preferred method within Stoicism. "In the Stoic school as well, however, which was not fundamentally opposed to political activity, the daily living together of the students with the teacher-spiritual guide was the ideal situation." Hadot, I., "The Spiritual Guide", 445.

might attend some lectures and were loosely affiliated, and an intensely devoted inner circle (to which Porphyry must have belonged), known as the companions (*hetairoi*).⁵⁶ This distinction between outer and inner circles had deep roots in ancient philosophy, and was by no means limited to Plotinus' school.⁵⁷ Indeed, the roots of this practice appear to go all the way back to Plato's Academy, and to have continued from there.⁵⁸ In the school of Taurus, another Platonist, we know that the inner circle of students would often come to his home for dinners and philosophical discussions.⁵⁹ A school of philosophy, whatever its doctrines, was not just an institution for conveying information or the technical details of practices, but rather was a community, and therefore personal.

Among the monks, not only do many of these same approaches appear, but they are intensified, thanks to the opportunities made possible by the more drastic forms of withdrawal undertaken the monks. Jean-Claude Guy epitomizes the Desert method well when he refers to ascetic instruction as defined by "personalized obedience."⁶⁰ This is especially the case among the anchorites who dominate the pages of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. While they were embedded within a community of hermits, much of their pedagogy was grounded in the relationship between an individual disciple (or small group of disciples) under one spiritual father. Approaches taken in the Pachomian communities or the White Monastery would have

⁵⁶ Dillon, "The Academy in the Middle Platonic Period", 72-3. Dillon draws the distinction between these two levels upon the lines of "young men who attended philosophical lectures to complete their education ... and serious students of Platonism, who would go on to become masters themselves." Ibid, 72. Much of the discussion of Plotinus' associates, at different levels, can be found at Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 7.

⁵⁷ Clarke, *Higher Education in the Ancient World*, 55.

⁵⁸ On the evidence for the multi-level structure in Plato's own time, see Edward Watts, "Creating the Academy," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 127 (2007): 108-11.

⁵⁹ Dillon, "The Academy in the Middle Platonic Period", 69.

⁶⁰ A key marker of Desert instruction "should be the personal relationship that ought to be established between the master and his disciple. The practice of obedience is marked in the first place by this personal relation, which gives it its own original character." Jean-Claude Guy, "Educational Innovation in the Desert Fathers," *Eastern Churches Review* (1974): 46.

shared some elements with the eremitic approach, and were certainly not totally impersonal, but they did include an institutional element that differentiates them from the teaching of the *Apophthegmata*'s hermits.

The personal element of eremitic pedagogy was no mere incidental add-on or a result of friendships between certain monks. Rather, it was at the heart of the entire method. The reason for this is that only close personal contact over an extended period could offer the abbas the familiarity with and insight into the mental and spiritual state of each individual monk necessary for proper guidance. An experienced elder had to get to know each disciple and engage him in conversation, pose probing questions, and observe his daily life in order to be able to pronounce the "Word" so central to the *Apophthegmata*'s program.⁶¹ A "Word" in the *Apophthegmata* is never an abstract, decontextualized thing. It is always given by *this* elder to *this* disciple to address *this* situation, under the particular guidance and inspiration of God.⁶² The teacher must know that the disciple is willing to act upon the Word before giving it, further intensifying the need for personal acquaintance.⁶³ This tailoring of pedagogy to disciples' individual needs was vital to how the Desert Fathers operated, as we shall consider in more detail below in the discussion of the "case sensitive" methodologies of the Desert Fathers.

Two markers of the personal nature of ascetic teaching relationships in particular are shared with the philosophical communities. First, there is the concern for succession. Like the philosophers, the monks felt that the transmission of spiritual wisdom was properly achieved by handing it down from master to disciple. Their teaching was not anyone's innovation, but rather

⁶¹ Cf. Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 77.

⁶² Cf. Harmless, "First, this 'word of salvation' was not meant, in the first instance, for everyone. It was a 'word' for this monk on this occasion, a key specially fitted to unlock a particular heart." Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 172.

⁶³ Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 77-8.

was the “tradition of holy teachers.”⁶⁴ As a consequence, they also kept track of personal chains of authority. Although there was no question of succeeding to the headship of a school, as a philosopher might, the credentialing value of one’s teacher was similarly prominent. The *Apophthegmata* is structured differently from Diogenes Laertius’ and Eunapius of Sardis’ narratives, and thus does not follow the format of introducing and concluding portraits of each figure in the same way (not even in the Alphabetical Collection, which is organized monk by monk, rather than topically), the fingerprints of these chains of authority are nonetheless all over the text. Many sayings are introduced as representing the wisdom of the elders generally, handed down in the community, following a form like “our fathers of old would say,” or something similar.⁶⁵ Even more tellingly, a substantial minority of sayings are couched in terms of one (more recent) abba passing on the wisdom of his (more venerable) master. On some occasions this is done by introducing monks in terms of their masters: “Abba Peter, the disciple of Abba Isaiah, said ...”⁶⁶ or “Abba Doulas, the disciple of Abba Bessarion, said ...”⁶⁷ On other occasions, a saying itself is passed on in terms of a monk quoting another (showing the path of oral transmission by which the saying came down in the community). When someone posed a question to Abba Peter, his response is introduced as follows: “Abba Peter said to him that Abba Lot used to say to him ...”⁶⁸ Similarly, at another place we hear that Abba Cassian “also said that Abba Moses told us about Abba Serapion, saying: ‘When I was younger and staying with Abba Theonas ...’”⁶⁹ By tracing the genealogies of the sayings in the Collection, the credentials of these pieces of wisdom, and the teaching of the elders as a whole, are assured. It is significant

⁶⁴ Systematic Collection, X.151.

⁶⁵ Systematic Collection, XI.21.

⁶⁶ Systematic Collection, XI.27.

⁶⁷ Systematic Collection, XII.3.

⁶⁸ Systematic Collection, XI.65.

⁶⁹ Systematic Collection, IV.27.

in this regard that we see so often the element of personal succession, rather than any institutional affiliation. Abba Peter tells someone what he heard from Abba Lot specifically, not what he learned at such and such a monastery, school, or city. This sort of succession is personal, and reflects a personal teaching experience as well.

The second marker of the personal nature of monastic pedagogy that was shared with the philosophers is the element of common life. Here there is not just a continuation or modification, but a substantial expansion. In the philosophical context, shared meals, conversations, family ties, religious observances, and more might bind a philosopher and his students into a tight-knit community. Among the monks, however, it was in many places common for disciples to live with or close by their masters, share property, and serve the teacher. A brief look at the kind of common life that characterized ascetic communities, especially the pedagogical relationships within them, will illustrate the deeply personal nature of monastic teaching.

Life in common was a vital part of the early monastic foundations at every level, certainly including the eremitic as well as the cenobitic communities. That the Pachomians or the monks at the White Monastery shared a common life is obvious. But elements of this communal approach also permeated the eremitic and semi-eremitic contexts. This can be observed at one level in the number of monks who lived together as brothers. Outside of any teaching relationship, and sometimes without any explicit hierarchical ranking, monks would often share a dwelling together, living as equals,⁷⁰ perhaps in a sort of mutual submission.⁷¹ These living situations could be so intimate as to draw accusations of homosexuality.⁷² The

⁷⁰ Systematic Collection, V.31, 32, XVII.26.

⁷¹ Systematic Collection, XVII.33.

⁷² Systematic Collection, V.33.

community also extended beyond those monks who shared dwellings, as can be seen from the fact that brothers might help care for an elder who was feared to have fallen ill⁷³ and in the way that the monks would gather around the dying.⁷⁴ Elements of community life pervaded the informal settlements of hermits.

Of particular importance within this communal mentality was the shared liturgical life of the community. Only the most extreme hermits (often described in borderline-legendary terms) abstained entirely from Christian community and the sacraments. For the rest, coming together on Saturday and Sunday for the *synaxis* remained a regular part of their practice, mentioned a number of times in the *Apophthegmata*. The importance of the sacred mysteries is emphasized in a saying interpreting the Psalm: “As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, o God.”⁷⁵ Desert deer, Poemen explains, eat serpents, and their mouths are burned by the venom, making them want to drink water. Likewise, “the monks dwelling in the Desert are burned by the venom of the wicked demons, and they long to come on Saturday and Sunday to the streams of water; that is, to the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁷⁶ A monk’s absence was once noticed at a Sunday liturgy, and prompted the community to investigate what was the matter (according to the saying in question, “that is the custom of the Desert: they do not hold the *synaxis* until everyone has come.”)⁷⁷ In addition to providing an occasion for shared liturgical celebration, the *synaxis* also was frequently connected to shared meals (usually referred to as *agapē* meals). One brother, who seems to have preferred his solitude, worried to Abba Sisoës, “What shall I do, for I go to the church, and often there is an *agapē* and they detain

⁷³ Systematic Collection, VII.53.

⁷⁴ Systematic Collection, XI.9-10, XV.132.

⁷⁵ Psalm 41:2.

⁷⁶ Systematic Collection, XVIII.22.

⁷⁷ Systematic Collection, XVIII.48. Similarly, Abba Paul the Simple is able, clairvoyantly, to ascertain the spiritual state of everyone in the monastic community by observing them at the *synaxis* at Systematic Collection, XVIII.26.

me?”⁷⁸ Sharing wine among the monks was also evidently a common practice, and one that occasioned a small but noteworthy set of reflections, concentrated in the chapter on the virtue of *enkrateia*, for reasons that need no explanation.⁷⁹ Finally, meals might be shared in other contexts as well, entirely apart from the liturgy, as in the case of a monk at Kellia who “brought his own fresh little loaves and invited a table of ascetic elders.”⁸⁰

Embedded within this overarching context of shared life, the teaching relationship between monastic elder and subordinate disciple took on many of these same elements, often familiar from philosophy (shared meals, shared worship, shared/close living spaces, and concern for one another’s well-being all being attested in philosophical contexts, as we have seen). However, the radical commitment and (especially for the Desert-dwellers of the *Apophthegmata*) physical separation from society at large fostered an intensity in the monks’ shared life. Shared or close living spaces, were common, even the norm, for those in a teaching relationship. The *Apophthegmata* speaks again and again of disciples living with their elders, often one disciple,⁸¹ sometimes two,⁸² sometimes more.⁸³ A disciple might move in with an established elder, but an elder might also build a new cell along with his disciple(s) to accommodate their shared life, as did Abba Agathon.⁸⁴ The shared life extended beyond living arrangements, and could include travelling together, as Abba Agathon and his disciples as well as Abba Bessarion and his disciple Doulas show.⁸⁵ While living together, it made practical sense for the teacher and his student to

⁷⁸ Systematic Collection, IV.45. See also III.16 and XII.8 for some (of many) additional references to *agapē* meals. IV.84 clearly references the same practice, although the term “*agapē*” is not used.

⁷⁹ Systematic Collection, IV.29, 43, 44, 63, 64, 91.

⁸⁰ Systematic Collection, IV.77.

⁸¹ Systematic Collection, IV.11, VII.13, 52, XIII.15.

⁸² Systematic Collection, VII.17.

⁸³ Systematic Collection, IV.99.

⁸⁴ Systematic Collection, VI.4.

⁸⁵ Systematic Collection, IV.8 and XIX.1-3, respectively.

share their food, rather than each maintaining his own separate supply.⁸⁶ On the evidence of these common food stores, they would surely have eaten together, and it is also attested that they would share meals with visitors who might happen by.⁸⁷

What emerges is an image of a life in which elders and disciples shared very nearly their entire lives. An elder was not just a functionary having a passing acquaintance with his disciples, but was implicated in their entire spiritual state, so much so that he might even take upon himself the burden of a disciple's sin.⁸⁸ The relationship was personal and intimate, in ways strongly reminiscent of the practices of the philosophers, but (thanks to the unique opportunities furnished by monastic living situations) intensified and broadened.

As shall be made clear through the following discussion of the methodology of ascetic and philosophical formation, neither of these chief characteristics of the teaching relationship happened by chance, and neither could be omitted (nor could the relationship itself be bypassed). There was no option of simply declaring oneself a monk or a philosopher without first submitting to guidance. The pedagogical relationship had to be mandatory in order for the community to pass down not only its doctrines and values (which might be tolerably communicated through texts), but all the intricacies of its practices as they applied to the myriad difficulties posed by life. To communicate this, a personal teaching presence is essential, and thus the relationship had to be mandatory. Likewise, philosophy and monasticism would both have been profoundly different phenomena were they not grounded in a relationship that was therapeutic. Recalling Epicurus, vain indeed would have been the discourse of philosophers and

⁸⁶ Systematic Collection, IV.27, 46, 69, 72, XIII.15.

⁸⁷ Systematic Collection, IV.48, 69, 70, 79.

⁸⁸ For an excellent orientation to the ascetic practice of bearing one another's burden, see Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony and Aryeh Kofsky, *The Monastic School of Gaza* (Boston: Brill, 2006), 145-56. Systematic Collection XVII.18 describes an example of this phenomenon.

monks who only handed down doctrines. The therapy of the soul was not a secondary benefit of philosophy or monasticism; it was the heart of both enterprises. As such, a therapeutic mentality had to be embedded in the fabric of the pedagogical relationship itself. First and foremost, this accomplished the immediate healing of the soul of the disciple, and second, it furnished the disciple with both the desire and the means to heal the souls of others. Finally, anticipating the next section of this chapter a little, the relationship had to be personal. This is because, as Nussbaum has rightly argued, a therapeutic approach must also be a case-sensitive approach.⁸⁹ This entails a real knowledge of the subject by the healer. As we continue exploring the methodology of ascetic and philosophical pedagogy in the coming pages, it will be essential to bear all these elements in mind, as they form the superstructure that makes possible the methodology.

Methodology

Having some understanding of what the relationships looked like, we should then ask what took place within them. While both contexts employed a variety of methods, including various forms of punishments and incentives, discourses, lectures, and more, not all of these merit our attention in this chapter. We know too little about some aspects; while in others there is little that is distinctive about the methods of philosophy and monasticism compared with other Late Antique forms of education (rhetorical schools, grammatical instruction, or apprenticeship in a trade). When the focus is placed squarely on those elements that are distinctive in these two traditions of spiritual therapy and progress, three methods in particular emerge as central. Also, these methods take on a similar shape for both, once again implying that the monks are drawing

⁸⁹ See Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 46 for the introduction of this principle. It recurs periodically throughout the work as she considers each individual school of thought.

upon philosophical models, whether deliberately or via a sort of cultural osmosis. These three prime methods are the master's frank speech to the disciple, the radical openness of the disciple to the master, and the sensitivity of the master to the unique details of the case presented by each individual disciple. We shall consider these methods in this order, with the caution that the three are closely intertwined, and none can properly exist without the others.

Frank Speech

In the philosophical communities of the ancient world, especially among the Epicureans, one method stands out as the primary means for bringing about moral transformation, especially among junior members of the community. That method is frank speech, or *parrēsia*. Sometimes misleadingly translated as “freedom of speech”, what is in fact meant by this term is not a political value of being allowed to speak one's mind without facing legal consequences. Rather, it is the practical virtue of being prepared to say whatever might need saying, regardless of the social or personal consequences that might follow. It is defined by a total honesty, a lack of embarrassment at addressing topics that might be felt to be off-limits for one reason or another, and a disregard for the fact that such directness might cause people to feel hurt or insulted.⁹⁰ By speaking in this bold, blunt manner, the philosophical teacher could expose his disciple's faults, even the most sensitive, and thereby open the door to curing them. So highly prized was this virtue that, “when asked, ‘what is the most beautiful thing among men?’” Diogenes the Cynic famously replied, “Frankness.”⁹¹ This “most beautiful thing” formed one of the central pillars of philosophical instruction.

⁹⁰ This last does require some nuance. As shall be clarified below, the point of frankness is to help the addressee, and so hurt feelings may need to be avoided in order to ensure effectiveness. They are not a concern in and of themselves, however.

⁹¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VI.69. For the Cynic (and other philosophers as well, though rarely with such panache), the virtue of frankness was valuable in all areas of life, not only in teaching relationships. The most famous instance of the exercise of frankness in antiquity is surely the (possibly legendary) story of

When examining frank speech in ancient philosophy, Epicureanism holds a certain pride of place, for two reasons. First, they seem to have placed a greater emphasis upon this method than other schools. It was in fact the primary tool in the hand of the Epicurean teacher for the formation of his disciples.⁹² Where other schools might place a greater emphasis upon dialectic in effecting spiritual advancement, or on the spiritual exercises discussed in the following chapter, the Epicureans leaned heavily upon frank speech – primarily in the context of the teaching relationship, and then later on in the context of Epicurean friendship as well.⁹³ Second, the Epicureans provide some of the best evidence for the method, considering it in detail more than other schools did. Of prime importance here is Philodemus, whose *On Frank Speech*, although fragmentary, is the fullest, most extensive treatment of the topic that survives from antiquity. It is also, and not coincidentally, the greatest surviving source on Epicurean spiritual guidance.⁹⁴

Despite the prominence of Epicureanism in this area, and of Philodemus in particular, the other schools also evinced a high regard for this virtue. We have already seen how Diogenes the Cynic considered it the “most beautiful thing”, and not only for teaching. Socrates’ outspokenness in the face of social approbation, prosecution, and even death put *parrēsia* at the foundation of the Platonic tradition. This admiration can be found later in the tradition in Plutarch, who considered it an essential element of genuine friendship. Someone who is

Diogenes being addressed by Alexander while lying in the sun. When offered any boon at all, Diogenes simply replies, “Get out of my light.” Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VI.38. Our concern here, however, is with this philosophical virtue as applied to formation.

⁹² Voula Tsouna, “Epicurean Therapeutic Strategies,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. James Warren (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 252.

⁹³ According to Philodemus, “they think it a friendly thing to apply frankness and to rebuke others, but to do oneself that which deserves criticism is shameful and contemptible.” Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, COL. XIXb.

⁹⁴ Asmis, “Basic Education in Epicureanism”, 223.

unwilling to offer criticism when one is in error cannot be, in his estimation, a true friend.⁹⁵

Among the Stoics, Epictetus was prominent in his praise of *parrēsia*. He held that it was central to the philosopher's task to rebuke and correct other people's faults.⁹⁶ Epictetus demonstrates his view when he addresses a (hypothetical?) prospective pupil:

Therefore I do not know what else I can say to you, for if I say what I think, I will distress you, and perhaps you will depart and not return. But, if I do not speak, look at what I will be doing: if you should come to me to be helped, and I help you in no way; and if you come as to a philosopher, and I shall say nothing to you as a philosopher. And how cruel it is to you to pass you over uncorrected!⁹⁷

As Sorabji observes, "Epictetus the Stoic approved of such criticism, provided it was exercised at the right moment to benefit the recipient."⁹⁸

Sorabji's observation, grounded in Epictetus' own words, points to a critical factor in all frankness, not only Stoic. As part of a philosophical teaching relationship (which was, at its heart, a therapeutic relationship), the point of this practice was to bring about a transformation in the recipient of the harsh criticism. Sampley expresses this element well: "Frank speech does not settle for the status quo; it seeks another level of performance. In some cases it reaches for increased maturity or, if the person in question has ventured onto a dubious path, it calls for a change in direction."⁹⁹ Frank speech may be blunt, and may even feel painful at times, but this pain is not an end in itself. The philosopher is not a misanthrope, however easily one might get that impression, especially from some of the more offensive Cynics. Rather, the pain felt by the recipient of sharp reproaches is a goad to improvement, and perhaps just an unpleasant but

⁹⁵ J. Paul Sampley, "Paul's Frank Speech with the Galatians and the Corinthians," in *Philodemus and the New Testament World*, ed. John Thomas Fitzgerald et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 295-6. Var. primary source citations from Plutarch, *How to Tell a Flatter from a Friend* and Plutarch, *How to Recognize One's Moral Progress*.

⁹⁶ Clarke, *Higher Education in the Ancient World*, 91-2.

⁹⁷ Epictetus, *Discourses*, III.1, and a similar remark at II.14.

⁹⁸ Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 218.

⁹⁹ Sampley, "Paul's Frank Speech with the Galatians and the Corinthians", 296.

bearable side effect of the rough treatment. Unsurprisingly, medical metaphors are prominent in this regard, as philosophers saw themselves as wise and kind doctors applying needed treatments, despite the unpleasantness of causing their disciples (whom, as we have seen, they knew quite closely) distress. Diogenes Laertius attributes just such an attitude to one Antisthenes, who only retained a small number of disciples due to his penchant for unsparing criticism. He defended his stern approach by saying that he wanted to be like a doctor giving out harsh medicine.¹⁰⁰

Because of this, it was not always considered necessary, or even advisable, for the harshest forms of frankness to be deployed in every circumstance. Rather, “different intensities of criticism are recommended for different recipients.”¹⁰¹ The philosopher, drawing upon his close personal knowledge of the disciple, had to determine what manner of speech was called for in each case. Many instances might require more moderate criticism, as opposed to a thorough dressing-down over the disciple’s faults.¹⁰² Tsouna’s account (based on Philodemus’ work) of this varied approach is worth citing in full:

The Epicurean teacher tailors his frank speech to the pupil’s personality and character, the kind of error that he has committed, and its magnitude. So, frank speech can be mild (*metrion*) or harsh (*sklēron*) and bitter (*pikron*); more intense towards pupils with a strong character, but less intense towards more tender persons. Compare a doctor who chooses his medicines in accordance with the patient’s physical constitution, the kind of malady affecting him, and its severity. If the doctor’s preferred method of treatment fails, he tries another method of treatment in the same patient or in a different one. Something similar holds for the teacher: if mild criticism fails to correct the error, he applies harsher criticism and may increase further its intensity in order to achieve his goal.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VI.4.

¹⁰¹ Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind*, 217. Sorabji is speaking specifically of Philodemus here, but the point extends more broadly.

¹⁰² Asmis, “Basic Education in Epicureanism”, 228-9.

¹⁰³ Tsouna, “Epicurean Therapeutic Strategies”, 253.

It is particularly interesting to note that, on some occasions, it is actually the better pupil who receives the harsher treatment. It is not simply that the least virtuous gets the full dose, while someone who has come a long way may be treated more gently. Rather, it can be precisely the opposite. The weak disciple, still plagued by many vices and without the fortitude to withstand the full force of the truth of their situation, will receive mild criticism, mixed with words of encouragement. It is the experienced disciple, fortified by years of teaching, a serious knowledge of his school's doctrines and methods, and accustomed to rebukes from his master who can expect to be most sharply criticized. At every stage, the individual needs of each student guide the teacher's decisions. Here we already anticipate the discussion of the principle of case sensitivity.

For the moment, however, the matter at hand is frankness, which now must be set in its monastic context. Among the monks, there is of course a strong emphasis upon milder forms of rebuke and correction. Too many times to count in the *Apophthegmata*, an elder sees a disciple in error, but says little or nothing, hoping to bring about repentance and correction through gentleness. This ascetic mildness was driven in large part by a concern to obey the Gospel commandment, "Do not judge, in order that you not be judged."¹⁰⁴ Bessarion gave one of the most notable examples of this attitude when "A brother who sinned was thrown out of church by the priest." In response, "Abba Bessarion arose and went out with him, saying, 'I too am a sinner.'"¹⁰⁵ A similar, slightly more colorful, story tells of Abba Moses being called to an assembly under similar circumstances. Moses comes, carrying a large sack of sand, riddled with holes. When queried about this strange behavior, he says, "My sins are running out behind me,

¹⁰⁴ Matthew 7:1.

¹⁰⁵ Systematic Collection, IX.2.

and I do not see them, and yet I have come today to judge the sins of another!” prompting the brethren to forgive the sinner.¹⁰⁶ Non-judgment was essential for the Desert Fathers as a matter of securing one’s own spiritual well-being. Transgressions might earn even a well-established monastic leader a stern response, as one judgmental abba (and head of a monastery) received from the famous Poemen after expelling a sinful brother.¹⁰⁷

However, it would be a grave mistake indeed to suspect that the abbats saw themselves as withholding needed rebukes from monks who would benefit from receiving them, solely in order to safeguard their own pristine moral purity. When Poemen rebukes the judgmental abba, for example, he is spurred to action initially by the fact that the sinful monk, in his despair upon being expelled from the monastery, has become suicidal. Likewise, Antony restores a different monk who was also expelled from a monastery for his sins to a state of spiritual health, and then sends him back to his monastic home. When he is initially rejected for readmission, Antony secures the monk’s position by sending the following message to the monastery: “A ship was wrecked on the open sea and lost its cargo; but, with toil, it was brought safe to land. Do you wish to sink that which has been brought safely to land?”¹⁰⁸ It is clear that the Fathers did not see holding back on harsh criticism as a trade-off in which they withheld valuable spiritual treatment in order to guarantee their own position. Rather, they perceived the damaging effects of excessive harshness, and greatly feared the possibility of bringing another to despair, knowing the moral burden they would have to bear for doing so. In addition, the abbats were convinced that gentleness, non-confrontation, and non-judgment could often turn out to be the most practical ways of bringing about repentance. One of the most memorable examples (a number

¹⁰⁶ Systematic Collection, IX.7. Abba Pior carries out a similar acted parable with containers of sand at Systematic Collection, IX.13.

¹⁰⁷ Systematic Collection, IX.10.

¹⁰⁸ Systematic Collection, IX.1.

could be adduced) of this conviction in practice came when a certain monk's cell was robbed.

The monk gladly permitted them to take whatever they wanted, and when they left, he noticed that they had missed a small bag. He ran after them, attempting to give them the bag as well. So struck were the robbers by his forbearance that they promptly restored all his property.¹⁰⁹ In this way, the abba in question not only safeguarded his own soul through gentleness, but also wrought a transformation in others.

While gentleness could often take this form of total non-judgment and non-retaliation (particularly common when dealing with others over whom one does not have personal teaching authority), it was not always so. Often gentleness might mean sweetening the bitter pill of criticism through words of praise and encouragement. Poemen furnishes an excellent example of this method when helping a brother tempted “by the demon of blasphemy.” He begins his response by encouraging the brother, telling him that, “fleshly battles often befall us because of carelessness, but this *logismos* does not attack us because of carelessness, but is the suggestion of the serpent himself.”¹¹⁰ Thus Poemen gives the brother confidence that he is not in danger of sin due to his failure, but rather because the devil himself is attacking him personally – a sign that, overall, he is doing rather well in his ascetic pursuits. As with the philosophers, however, this kind of gentleness was not always a sign of a monk's progress. It might just as well signal that the disciple in question was not yet strong enough to meet the full demands of monastic life or to endure the sharp criticism he deserved. The first saying in the chapter on the virtue of forbearance illustrates this principle. When asked by a group of monks how they might be saved, Antony cites the Gospel: “If someone should strike you upon your right cheek, turn to him

¹⁰⁹ Systematic Collection, XVI.21.

¹¹⁰ Systematic Collection, X.63.

the other also.”¹¹¹ When the brothers protest that the saying is too difficult, Antony softens the commandment: “if you cannot turn the other, then at least endure the first.” This being still too difficult, Antony tells them at least to not retaliate. Even this proves too much, and so Antony gives up, saying to his disciple, “Make the brothers a little soup, for they are sick,” and to the monks, “If you cannot do this and you do not wish to do that, what can I do for you? You need prayers.”¹¹² Throughout the saying, Antony is supremely gentle, and even when these shockingly resistant monks refuse to give him any opening, all he does is offer them soup and prayer; he never upbraids them for their obvious failure. Yet there is no sense that these monks are being treated gently because they have advanced sufficiently that rough treatment has become inappropriate. Rather, they are so weak that a stern reproach might well make them fold up like the moistened reeds the monks wove into baskets.

Despite this emphasis upon softening the blow, upon gentleness, upon non-judgment, which is so well-known in the Desert Fathers and has contributed so much to their enduring popularity, it was in no way the entire story. On many occasions the monks had to be, as was said of Abba Theodore, “like a sword,”¹¹³ or like Abba Aseos, whose disciple (who once regarded him “as an angel”) said “if you say a word to me, I consider it as a sword.”¹¹⁴ Rebukes could be stern, even sarcastic when the situation called for it. Take the instance of an elder and a younger monk, who were both given some vegetables. The elder eats his, while the younger boasts to the elder, “Look, I have kept mine,” hoping perhaps for some word of praise for his self-control. The elder quips back, “You were not hungry brother; that is why you kept them.”¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Matthew 5:39.

¹¹² Systematic Collection, XVI.1.

¹¹³ Systematic Collection, VIII.3.

¹¹⁴ Systematic Collection, XI.12.

¹¹⁵ Systematic Collection, IV.89.

Another brother made a similar mistake, compounding his guilt by doing so in public. At a common festival meal, a monk who was apparently practicing a pre-modern version of the raw-food diet refused the food that was being served, on account of its having been cooked. When one of the servers was informed, he called out to another server, loudly enough for the whole room to hear, saying, “This brother does not eat cooked food, so bring him something salted.” An elder, shocked by this ostentatious display, stood up (in the sight of all, it would seem) and chastised the ostentatious ascetic: “It would be better for you to eat meat in your cell today and not to hear that shout in front of everyone.”¹¹⁶ The Fathers were well aware that gentleness was not always enough to achieve their pedagogical goals. They knew, as Abba Isidore expresses, that “It is necessary for disciples to love those who are their teachers as fathers and fear them as rulers, neither relaxing fear through love nor dimming love through fear.”¹¹⁷ The “love” side of this equation was prominent for the monks, and has been more celebrated (not entirely fairly) in scholarship than its parallel among the philosophers. Nevertheless, a real fear was necessary, and this was primarily brought about, as far as the *Apophthegmata* are concerned, through frank speech, along with the imposition of fasts, vigils, etc.¹¹⁸

That said, even sharp rebukes could be delivered with a certain cleverness and wit. Two memorable stories illustrate the point. First, Abba Silvanus was once visited by a certain brother

¹¹⁶ Systematic Collection, VIII.26.

¹¹⁷ Systematic Collection, X.42.

¹¹⁸ There is not much evidence of corporal punishment in the *Apophthegmata*. It is rarely mentioned and is usually explicitly disapproved of when it does arise, an attitude which seems consistent with the text’s pedagogical approach in general. Corporal punishment was of course well-known in Egyptian monasticism generally speaking. There are the famous three whips hanging from trees at Nitria (Palladius, *Lausiac History*, 7.3). Shenoute of Atripe extensively documents his own imposition of beatings, cf. Rebecca Krawiec, *Shenoute and the Women of the White Monastery: Egyptian Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 28-9 on the role of corporal punishment in the power structure of the community. Krawiec notes the need to be attentive to the types of evidence available in differing cases, pointing out that if the same sorts of evidence were available for the Pachomians (or, one might add, the *Apophthegmata*) as are available for the White Monastery, the differences between them might not seem so large. It remains, unfortunately, impossible to say for certain.

who, seeing the monks hard at work, felt that they should be attending more to their spiritual duties, citing the Gospel: “Mary has chosen the good part.”¹¹⁹ Silvanus then puts this spiritual brother up in an empty cell, where he waits to be called for the meal. As the hours pass and no food is forthcoming, the brother eventually wanders out and inquires with Silvanus as to why he was not called. Silvanus then humbled the brother: “You are a spiritual person and have no need of this food. But we, being fleshly, want to eat; it is on this account that we work. But you ‘have chosen the good part,’ reading all day, and you do not want to eat fleshly food.”¹²⁰ A similar tale is told of the famed Abba John Colobos, who once told his brother, “I wish to be without cares, just as the angels are without cares, not working but unceasingly worshiping God.” After a week on his own, however, Colobos decided he had had enough, returned and knocked:

He heard him from within, before he opened to him, saying, ‘Who are you?’ And he said, ‘I am John.’ The other answered, ‘John has become an angel and is no longer among men.’ And he entreated him, saying, ‘It is I, open for me!’ And he did not open for him, but left him to suffer until morning. When later he opened up, he said to him, ‘Look, you are human; therefore you need to work in order that you might nourish yourself.’ And he made repentance, saying, ‘Forgive me.’¹²¹

Both of these stories, significantly, come in the chapter on the virtue of discernment, which involves knowing how to properly respond to diverse spiritual and moral situations. The editor of the Systematic Collection, then, is implicitly telling the reader that these rebukes, which cannot exactly be called “gentle” or “mixed” expressions of frankness, even so demonstrate the flexibility needed for the proper application of the method. It is, we must bear constantly in mind, a *therapeutic* method, not simply a didactic one. The content of both of these sayings could have been conveyed perfectly well through a simple statement or a little biblical exegesis. However, the recipients of these rebukes, and, even more importantly, the reader who encounters

¹¹⁹ Luke 10:42.

¹²⁰ Systematic Collection, X.99.

¹²¹ Systematic Collection, X.36.

them in the lines of the *Apophthegmata*, will remember the lesson much more readily by recalling the hours of hunger and shame followed by a one-line response that cuts the erring monk to the quick. Here, then, we find the rule that governs all the various modulations of frank speech, from its gentlest to its sharpest applications, from the plain-spoken to the sarcastically witty explanations. It is a question of what will make the brother in question repent and change. This can even be seen in one of the most flat, direct rebukes one can find in the Sayings. A brother asks a certain elder to pray that he might be helped in his struggle with sexual temptation. When it is revealed to the elder in a vision that the monk is bringing trouble upon himself through plain negligence, he tells him, “You yourself are the cause, assenting to your *logismoi*.” At this, the brother shapes up, and finds rest from the struggle.¹²² This story, as is typical, is preserved because it was effective, and the reading of it may be effective again for a new monk. The precise form or degree of frank speech to be used in a given situation was judged on these criteria alone.

There remains the question of the social structures through which this frankness might be expressed. As with the philosophers, this could vary, and did apply outside the bounds of the teaching relationship. That relationship was, however, the primary place for practicing frankness. As the above sayings indicate, this kind of spiritual direction could be both proactive and reactive. Some (as the monk who was troubled by *porneia*) might come to an elder (often their own master, but they might also consult another abba with a reputation for wisdom) and ask for help, knowing that they might be in for a sharp word or two. In other cases, as with Colobos and the monk who “chose the better part”, they might wander inadvertently into error in the presence of a discerning elder, who could confront them about their mistakes. There are a

¹²² Systematic Collection V.23.

number of instances in the *Apophthegmata* of this kind of proactive frank speech.¹²³ The ordinary approach, however, was to critique those who were under one's authority, especially the direct authority of the teaching relationship. One saying about a Syrian elder illustrates the point on both sides clearly. This great elder had "a brother living with him," a disciple who was always "ready to condemn if he saw someone stumbling. Often the elder admonished him about this, saying, 'Truly, child, you are going astray and will only lose your own soul ...'"¹²⁴ Both sides of the coin are evident. The disciple is far too ready to criticize those who are not under his care, and whom he therefore has no standing to rebuke. His elder, however, has no hesitation about calling him to account on the matter ("often ... admonished him"). While the elder, as he continues his discourse, puts an emphasis upon humility and non-judgment, those lessons do not prevent his own reproof of the erring brother. This is not a matter of hypocrisy, but of different roles, and the different levels of authority that come with them. This great Syrian was in a legitimate position to critique his disciple, but his disciple had no grounds to criticize others. Abba Macarius epitomizes this lesson for Pachomius, who asked him about correcting errant monks. Macarius told the great cenobite, "Instruct and judge justly those who are under you. Do not judge anyone outside. For it is written, 'Do you not judge those who are within? But those who are outside, God judges.'"¹²⁵

As with the philosophers, however, frankness, while grounded in the teaching relationship (both as the primary place in which it was used and as the place in which monks would learn how the technique worked), also extended to other relationships as well. While it is difficult to speak of "friendship" in the monastic context in a sense analogous to, say, Epicurean

¹²³ Systematic Collection, III.41, 51, and IV.10, for example.

¹²⁴ Systematic Collection, XV.122.

¹²⁵ Systematic Collection, X.46, I Corinthians 5:12-3.

friendship, certain monks did have connections with others whom they recognized as equals and might consult on spiritual issues. These consultations might address moral questions, matters of biblical interpretation, doctrinal errors, or ascetic practice.¹²⁶ Even advanced monks with decades of experience still felt the need to consult each other on certain points.¹²⁷ As in the case of the teaching relationship, and perhaps even more so between equals, the sharpness of the frank speech between established elders needed to be tempered by humility and non-judgment. It was of the greatest importance neither to speak without consideration nor to berate one's interlocutor.

One last point of contact on the matter of frankness is worth noting. We saw that, for the philosophers, frankness had a primary role in the teaching relationship, but was also (most famously among the scandalous Cynics) important as a virtue when dealing with others in any circumstance, but especially with those in positions of power. The Desert Fathers shared this broader sense of the value of frankness as well, perhaps grounded in the weight they assigned to the words of an experienced abba – a weight almost equal to that of Scripture itself.¹²⁸ Armed with the ability to speak words of such authority, they did not feel a need to be cowed by temporal authorities. Arsenius was particularly bold in this regard. On one occasion, he was on the point of tearing up the will of a senatorial relative of his who had left him a great deal of money until the official messenger begged him not to, fearing for his own life if the will were destroyed.¹²⁹ On another occasion, the powerful archbishop Theophilus came to visit Arsenius with a government official in tow. After a period of silence, Arsenius asked, "If I say something to you, will you observe it?" Having secured their agreement, he bluntly ordered them,

¹²⁶ For example, Systematic Collection, X.19, XV.91, XV.92, XVIII.4, and IV.10, respectively.

¹²⁷ Systematic Collection, XV.91 and 92, among many others, illustrate this point.

¹²⁸ Driscoll, *Evagrius Ponticus*, 180.

¹²⁹ Systematic Collection, VI.2.

“Wherever you hear Arsenius is, do not come near.”¹³⁰ Theophilus later sought to visit the old man again, and was rebuffed so sternly that he was forced to say, “If I come to chase him away, I shall no longer go to the holy one.”¹³¹ For the monks as for the philosophers, while frankness began in the teaching relationship, the virtue extended more broadly as well.

Radical Openness

Frankness is not a virtue that can exist on its own. Without the disciple being totally open with his teacher (or, for the more advanced practitioners, the friend being open to the friend), frank speech would routinely miss its mark, even degenerating into nothing more than cutting personal attacks. For frank speech to have any chance of succeeding in its mission, it must be grounded in the actual situation of the recipient of the speech. Even the most perceptive teacher can only do so much when confronted with a disciple who is actively concealing important elements of his moral life from him. A real and total openness on the part of the disciple is strictly necessary for any kind of psychagogy. Without it, spiritual guidance ends up as little more than guesswork.¹³²

The value of this openness was recognized in the philosophical communities, to be sure, and it was expressly tied to frank speech. Regarding the Epicureans, Tsouna has observed the dependence of frankness upon the student’s attitude: “Ideally, the process begins on the student’s own initiative: he goes to the teacher because he feels an ‘itching’ at what he has done and is confident that he will receive help. He realizes, however dimly, that the unpleasantness of the

¹³⁰ Systematic Collection, II.6.

¹³¹ Systematic Collection, II.7.

¹³² Openness of this sort is also, of course, tied closely to the necessity of a degree of self-awareness, grounded in these communities in the spiritual exercise of examination of conscience, discussed in the following chapter.

treatment will be vastly outweighed by its benefits.”¹³³ Frank speech, then, does not ordinarily begin with the teacher observing some fault in the student and assailing it. Rather, it begins with the student’s awareness of his own shortcomings, which he then manifests to the teacher, opening up his private deeds and inner thoughts for rigorous inspection. In close to a dozen of the surviving fragments of *On Frank Criticism* (that is, *parrēsia*), Philodemus emphasizes the importance of this openness. At one point he states that it makes no sense to enter into the teaching relationship without a corresponding commitment to exposing one’s errors and weaknesses to the master.¹³⁴ Shortly thereafter he explains that not revealing one’s errors is equivalent to actively concealing them,¹³⁵ and for these reasons “many of the companions will in some way willingly make matters known, without the guide even making an inquiry.”¹³⁶ It is only in light of this routine self-disclosure on the part of the students that the wise man has the particular knowledge necessary to speak frankly to each of them in the individual way required.¹³⁷ In this way, the Epicureans regularly and openly confessed their faults and accepted fraternal correction as part of the broader project of Epicurean friendship and instruction.¹³⁸

¹³³ Tsouna, “Epicurean Therapeutic Strategies”, 252, citing De lib. Dic, fr. 49.2-5, about one Heraclides, who, “assigning less importance to the censures for the things he would reveal than to the benefit from them, he would reveal his errors to Epicurus.”

¹³⁴ Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, fr. 40.

¹³⁵ Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, fr. 41.

¹³⁶ Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, fr. 42. Philodemus appears also to have encouraged students to report the errors of their fellow students to the teachers, as well as their own (*On Frank Criticism*, fr. 49-50). In a community working to break down feelings of shame at exposure and encourage frank speech, this is an understandable approach. The Desert Fathers, for their part, would never countenance anything of the sort, due to their radical commitment to non-judgment.

¹³⁷ Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, col. IVb.

¹³⁸ Nussbaum hypothesizes that a certain, rather different form of confession may have been part of the early stages of Skeptic formation as well, although we have little evidence of Skeptic practice. “It is likely that [the pupil] will begin by describing to the teacher the dogmatic beliefs that have failed to bring her comfort. She will display her situation by revealing as many cognitive commitments as she cares about, and by showing the degree of refinement and sophistication with which she grasps the arguments both for and against them. The teacher will now proceed through her beliefs, bringing forward counterarguments ... in each case, he will try to take her into the condition of equipoise.” Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 295-6.

This Epicurean confession must be understood within the context of Epicurean therapy as a whole. They did not share the Stoic commitment to moral virtue as the sole good or the Platonic desire to purify themselves for the ascent to the One. Instead, they located the problem of wrongdoing in suffering, especially the mental pain that comes from feelings of guilt. By admitting their wrongdoings and accepting rebukes, they sought liberation from this suffering – the observation that confession is good for the soul is by no means recent!¹³⁹ The value of this confession, moreover, is not limited to the one doing the confessing. The one giving advice, as Foucault has noted, likewise “reactualizes it [the philosophical advice he gives] for himself.”¹⁴⁰ Philodemus, again in *On Frank Criticism*, lays out in detail the proper approach for the confessor. “Indeed he will always form his words without wrath”¹⁴¹ and will have a “happy, friendly, and kind disposition”,¹⁴² but at the same time, he will be totally unsparing: “The wise man thus makes use of frankness towards his friends, like Epicurus and Metrodorus.”¹⁴³ This friendly-but-firm rebuke, of benefit to the teacher as well as the disciple, was the object of Epicurean openness.

¹³⁹ “The [Epicurean] therapy would begin (and continue) with confession, as the teacher would listen to [the pupil’s] account of her life, her anxieties and ends, her religious attitudes, her view of the cosmos, her loves – in order to understand how, and in what areas, she requires therapeutic treatment.” Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 275. Nussbaum critiques earlier scholarship for having “assimilated the practices in question too closely, I think, to Christian practices from which it is important to distinguish them.” Ibid, 134. Nussbaum, for her part, may assimilate them too closely to the practices of modern psychoanalysis.

¹⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3: *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1986), 51.

¹⁴¹ Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, Fr. 12.

¹⁴² Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, Fr. 85.

¹⁴³ Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, Fr. 15. He also discusses the proper attitude of the one receiving criticism. See for example Fr. 88 or Col. 1a. In their introduction to the critical edition of *On Frank Criticism*, Konstan, et al helpfully expound the virtue of *parrēsia* in its social and philosophical context. Konstan, et al, ed. and trans., *Philodemus, On Frank Criticism: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 5-8. Especially (p. 7): “frank speech is an approximate or conjectural method used by friends in the therapeutic technique for the healing of souls, comparable to the methods employed by physicians in the art of healing and by pilots in the art of navigation.” Additionally, cf. 118-31 of this dissertation for a discussion of the role of frankness in philosophical and monastic formation.

Among the Platonists, a similar mentality can be seen in the requirements for setting out on the philosophical quest established by Alcinous, referenced above. A prospective student needed many moral qualities as well as intellectual ones. A beginner, on this view, who concealed his moral failings from his teacher would in the end be cheating no one but himself, as he would be attempting to build on a weak foundation. If Alcinous is normative in any way (and we have some reason to suspect he is), then an open, honest, *moral* examination before the teacher would have had to play some role in any student's philosophical progress. This intuition drawn from Alcinous' text is confirmed by Plutarch's treatise on discerning the extent to which one is advancing in the moral life. Among his various criteria is a commitment to making one's errors known to those capable of treating them, even if that treatment may be unpleasant. Using the venerable metaphor of the medical arts, he points out how those suffering from different ailments seek out doctors, while only those driven half-mad by their conditions avoid them.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, Plutarch writes, "those who are incurable are the ones who are hostilely and rudely disposed and angry towards those who question and admonish them, while those who are patient and submit have a milder case."¹⁴⁵ This willingness to seek out moral instruction and reproof is a key sign of moral progress.

The connection between a teacher's criticism of his students and their openness to him was known among the Stoics as well. Diogenes Laertius records a brief anecdote about the Stoic founder, Zeno of Citium, who was asked once by a student of his (the colorfully-named "Dionysius the Renegade") "Why am I the only one you do not set straight?" Zeno tersely replied, "Because I do not trust you."¹⁴⁶ Long has observed the same phenomenon in Epictetus'

¹⁴⁴ Plutarch, *How to Recognize One's Moral Progress*, 11.1, 81f-82.a

¹⁴⁵ Plutarch, *How to Recognize One's Moral Progress*, 11.1, 82.a

¹⁴⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VII.23.

approach to philosophy, the undertaking of which depends upon “a ruthlessly accurate assessment of your qualifications and abilities.”¹⁴⁷ Once again we find openness prized, and for the specific reason that it is the necessary foundation for frank speech.

While the philosophers saw great value in openness, the monks were truly radical in their commitment to it. In Rousseau’s words, the monastic disciples’ “attitude involved nothing less than total surrender.”¹⁴⁸ The full disclosure of even the most private inner thoughts was indispensable to monastic pedagogy. The key word here, it must be emphasized, is *thoughts*, that is, *logismoi*. Monastic openness, monastic confession was not just a matter of revealing one’s sins to the elder, in the sense of specific wrong actions or even wrong speech. While this was certainly included, the most important (and most radical) element involved the manifestation of one’s entire inner discourse for the evaluation of the teacher.¹⁴⁹ Harmless explains this:

The elder would train his disciples in the basics of desert living, such as how to build a cell, how to weave baskets, and how to pray the psalms. But the deeper and more serious guidance came from the young monk’s regular visits to the abba. On these occasions, he manifested his ‘thoughts’ (*logismoi*) ... Many of the stories in the Apophthegmata flow from these exchanges between a young monk and his abba about the underlying meaning of his ‘thoughts’.¹⁵⁰

The task of the disciple was to reveal all of his thoughts to his abba. This had to include apparently benign worries such as feelings of homesickness or having been hurt by gossip right along with obviously sinful thoughts such as sexual fantasies or deep-seated grudges. With this

¹⁴⁷ Long, *Epictetus*, 111.

¹⁴⁸ Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian*, 2nd Edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 20.

¹⁴⁹ “What is essential is to show the spiritual advisor not one’s sins but one’s thoughts (*logismoi*).” Irénée Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 155. Cf. the discussion of examination of conscience in the following chapter, in which it was also essential to discover not only one’s sins, but one’s successes and one’s seemingly innocuous thoughts as well.

¹⁵⁰ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 178.

full disclosure in hand, the elder could then help the disciple understand the actual import of each thought and what response, if any, was required.¹⁵¹

The *Apophthegmata* drives home again and again the centrality of this total openness, achieved through confession, for the Desert program. Over and over again, younger or less experienced monks confess their thoughts and sins to elders. The stories usually involve a phrase along the lines of “A brother ... visited a great elder”¹⁵² or “Some brothers visited a holy elder dwelling in a Desert place.”¹⁵³ On one occasion we learn that “Three of the fathers had the custom of going annually to the blessed Abba Antony. Two of them would ask him about *logismoi*.”¹⁵⁴ The saying will then continue with the thoughts the monk in question confessed and what the elder had to say in response. The elder, then, had a corresponding obligation to give advice to the monk on how to deal with the problems he was facing, advice that was always attentive to the specific case. It was possible for confession to go in a surprising direction, as a famous saying in the chapter on humility has the great Abba Arsenius causing some shock by asking a monk from a poor Egyptian background for advice about his thoughts,¹⁵⁵ but such sayings are uncommon, and in any case the point of the Arsenius saying is to emphasize his humility. For the most part, monastic confession went from novice monks to experienced elders.

The frequent depictions of this self-disclosure in the *Apophthegmata* indicate the value the monks saw in the practice. In addition to these stories, the Systematic Collection also provides a number of exhortations to confession and expressions of its paramount importance. In a story about the power of openness to bring about spiritual healing, Abba Theonas says,

¹⁵¹ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 229-30.

¹⁵² Systematic Collection V.23.

¹⁵³ Systematic Collection XVI.23.

¹⁵⁴ Systematic Collection XVII.5.

¹⁵⁵ Systematic Collection XV.7.

“Nothing so harms the monks and brings such joy to the demons as hiding the *logismoi* from the spiritual fathers.”¹⁵⁶ Again, Abba Cassian attributes to Abba Moses the saying, “It is not good to hide the *logismoi*, but to make them known to spiritual and discerning elders.”¹⁵⁷ A few sayings later, we learn that confession to an elder can on its own be a powerful weapon against *porneia* (even prior to any particular response from the elder), “for nothing disgusts the demon of *porneia* so much at revealing his works, and nothing brings him such joy as hiding the *logismoi*.”¹⁵⁸ Beyond all these sayings, however, the definitive expression of the radical extent of monastic self-disclosure must surely be Abba Antony’s advice that, “If possible, the monk ought to confide in the elders how many steps he takes or how many drops he drinks in his cell, in case he is making a mistake in those matters.”¹⁵⁹

What is emphasized in all of these sayings is the need to disclose not only sinful deeds (that much is obvious), but the thoughts as well, even the seemingly benign. The disciple’s entire life should be on the table for inspection and modification at any point.¹⁶⁰ This modification, of course, depended upon the total obedience that was expected of the monks.¹⁶¹ Both obedience and openness were grounded in the same sense of total trust in the elders, a trust dependent upon the conviction that the abba’s words were given under the direct guidance of

¹⁵⁶ Systematic Collection, IV.27.

¹⁵⁷ Systematic Collection, V.4.

¹⁵⁸ Systematic Collection, V.16.

¹⁵⁹ Systematic Collection, XI.2.

¹⁶⁰ It is important to note that openness could also flow in the other direction, also for therapeutic reasons. In two of the sayings mentioned above (V.4 and V.16), part of what helped the disciple open up to the elder was the elder first opening up to the disciple about his own struggles with sin. This could help engender trust, put the younger monk at ease, and also model the proper way to disclose one’s problems.

¹⁶¹ In a slightly later context, Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky identify obedience along with humility as comprising the “two central ideals” underpinning Dorotheus of Gaza’s program. Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, *The Monastic School of Gaza*, 44. The virtue was important enough to have its own chapter (Systematic Collection XIV), as well as many references elsewhere in the *Apophthegmata*.

God.¹⁶² Monks were expected to tolerate a great deal, even from a plainly bad abba,¹⁶³ only being permitted to depart when it was clear that a particular elder was causing spiritual harm.¹⁶⁴ As shocking as the requirement to obey even apparently irrational commands sounds to modern ears, for the monks it was part and parcel with the radical trust that was necessary for the ascetic enterprise, and as such ultimately inseparable from either frankness or openness.

Case Sensitivity

In the discussion of both of these methods – the total self-disclosure of the disciple and the total, even brutal honesty of the teacher – we have noted how both served to apprise the teacher of the actual situation with which he was confronted so that he might tailor his treatment to the disciple's specific needs. Apart from these tools, the case-sensitive approach, which is a fundamental distinctive of monastic and philosophical pedagogy, is not possible. Without openness, the teacher does not have access to the actual situation. He is dependent upon the disciple's willingness to disclose the truth about himself. Without frankness, the teacher is hamstrung, unable to address the core of the problem, held back by hesitance, embarrassment, or a misplaced sense of propriety. In order to assist the disciple, the teacher must be permitted to deal in specifics, even uncomfortable ones.

To understand precisely why this is so, a clearer picture of what “case-sensitive” means in this context will be necessary. In both the use and the understanding of this term, we are operating in the framework established by Martha Nussbaum, who has sought to find connections between ancient philosophical modes of guidance and contemporary concepts of psychological therapy. Nussbaum lays out the criteria that the arguments of each philosophical

¹⁶² Systematic Collection, X.94.

¹⁶³ Even unjust beatings are not enough to justify leaving one's abba (Systematic Collection, XV.18), and enduring under a bad teacher may actually, if inadvertently, bring about spiritual growth (Systematic Collection, XVI.27).

¹⁶⁴ Systematic Collection, X.90.

school will have to meet in order to be considered “therapeutic” or “medical” in the sense she means. Among the three primary characteristics (each of which she considers essential; she also adds seven additional characteristics, only some of which must be present) is the necessity that the arguments “are *responsive to the particular case*: just as a good doctor heals case by case, so good medical argument responds to the pupil’s concrete situation and needs.”¹⁶⁵ Nussbaum describes this sort of argument as “searchingly concrete,” and committed to “learning about and grappling with” the specific cultural (and other) circumstances of each individual: “Central in what they offer is their rich responsiveness to the concrete.”¹⁶⁶ This does not imply a sort of relativism or a lack of moral norms, but rather a realization that “it is *in* the particular that the norm must, if at all, be realized,” a fact which “all the schools recognize.”¹⁶⁷ For the present discussion of pedagogy, then, this means a commitment on the part of the teacher to two things.

1) The teacher must learn about the specific circumstances of the pupil – who he is, where he comes from, what his strengths and weaknesses, hopes, fears, temptations, and inclinations are. This goes well beyond simply distinguishing a promising/advanced pupil from a slow one, and requires a deep knowledge of the individual only possible in an open, personal relationship (notice how the pieces of the interlocking system come together). 2) The teacher must tailor his methods in each case to the individual on the basis of this knowledge. Again, this is not a matter simply of giving a promising student extra reading or spending additional time with a slow learner (although this may be part of case sensitivity); it is a matter of knowing how to elicit a

¹⁶⁵ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 46. Italics in original. As part of her examination of each school of thought, Nussbaum evaluates its therapeutic credentials in the light of these ten traits.

¹⁶⁶ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 44.

¹⁶⁷ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 487. Italics in original; “all the schools” presumably does not include Platonism, which Nussbaum dismisses (cf. the discussion of Nussbaum in chapter 3).

successful response in a variety of specific situations, sometimes using one approach, sometimes another.

This aspect of philosophical teaching merits attention not only for how definitive it is of philosophy in itself, but also on account of the way it differentiates the philosophical schools from other forms of teaching and education, including higher education, in Late Antiquity. Both at the grammatical and rhetorical levels, formal education in the ancient world was known for its rigid consistency across time and throughout the Empire. Even as major changes in the political and social structure of the Empire took place, little changed in the educational structures, something that eventually became a problem for the learned classes, a limitation on the system's adaptability.¹⁶⁸ While there was no formal structure that could have censured or banned any given grammarian for deviating from the conventional curriculum, diverging in any serious way from the standard course simply was not done.¹⁶⁹ At the rhetorical level as well, consistency was the name of the game. The same *progymnasmata*, the same exercises, the same formulae were worked over by student after student across the Empire. The immediate recognizability of rhetorical tropes from Late Antiquity and the ease with which any contemporary scholar familiar with the time period can identify a piece of Late Ancient rhetoric testify to the remarkable consistency of the educational pattern. From Clarke's gloomy perspective, "one cannot help pitying those who had to submit to so monotonous a curriculum."¹⁷⁰ This continuity-based approach persisted well after the leadership of the Empire was given over to Christian hands.

¹⁶⁸ At least in the view of some historians. See, for example, Joy Connolly, "Problems of the Past in Imperial Greek Education," in *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, ed. Yun Lee Too (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 339-40, 42, who questions how well a system of education designed at producing good Athenian citizens could have equipped its subjects for the complexities of Late Antique Roman life. The extent to which these problems would have been felt at the time is uncertain, as the conservative preservation of Hellenistic identity was a key objective of *paideia*.

¹⁶⁹ Clarke, *Higher Education in the Ancient World*, 21. Clarke does concede that "It would be easy to condemn them [the grammarians] as pedantic and unimaginative. But within their limits they were successful." Ibid, 27.

¹⁷⁰ Clarke, *Higher Education in the Ancient World*, 44.

Paideia looked strikingly similar in Christian hands as it had before, the change of religion bringing little in the way of educational transformation, at least in the short term.¹⁷¹ The continuity, the rigidity, the dependence upon the same methods all speak to a system designed to produce many people capable of entering the same world of *paideia*. Valuable as this surely was for the imperial elite, and even effective in its way, there can be no question of calling this approach “case sensitive”.

In philosophy, however, we have already seen a number of indications of the flexibility of the pedagogical process. Given the aim of philosophy (the healing, and ultimately the divinization of the soul), the particular troubles faced by each soul were much more relevant than the particular struggles of each new rhetorical student. Our discussion of frank speech has shown some of the areas in which flexibility guided philosophical formation. For Philodemus (and others who utilized his methods, including the Apostle Paul in the view of some), the modulation of a rebuke to the needs and readiness of the audience was an essential part of how frank speech functioned.¹⁷² Indeed, it has been argued that Paul’s approach of being “all things to all people”¹⁷³ is grounded in a psychagogical approach drawn from Philodemus’ intellectual milieu.¹⁷⁴ Differences in age, gender, social status, and more all condition the teacher’s response to a situation, the proper level of harshness to deploy.¹⁷⁵ Miscalculations in any of these categories may lead to rebellion, despair, indignation, or a variety of other useless reactions that stymie the instruction before it begins.

¹⁷¹ Rappe, “The New Math: How to Add and to Subtract Pagan Elements in Christian Education,” 406-7.

¹⁷² Fiore, “The Pastoral Epistles in the Light of Philodemus’ ‘On Frank Criticism’”, 284.

¹⁷³ 1 Corinthians 9:22.

¹⁷⁴ Glad, *Paul and Philodemus*, 1, ff.

¹⁷⁵ Asmis, “Basic Education in Epicureanism”, 233-4.

This is easy enough to see when it comes to criticism, but Nussbaum emphasizes that it is also a vital element of the Epicurean curriculum as a whole. The teacher must be “a keen diagnostician of particulars, devising a specific course of treatment for each pupil.”¹⁷⁶ This includes criticism, but also the arguments themselves by which Epicurean dogma is defended and explicated. This might include sharp attacks on the meaninglessness of all other approaches to life (Nussbaum identifies Lucretius’ attacks on love as one example). These sorts of arguments served to purge the subject of their attachments to false ideals. It follows that the level of emphasis placed upon each argument will depend on what attachments most afflict a particular pupil. One troubled by love and loss may be pointed in Lucretius’ direction, but another person may be plagued by a debilitating fear of death or may tremble with irrational terror before the statues of the gods. No two prospective Epicureans will have the exact same set of attachments to false goods or fears of false evils. While every committed student will eventually come to be acquainted with all of these arguments at some level, the Epicurean teacher will choose which arguments to emphasize based upon the particular desires and fears of the student, on account of the practical orientation of Epicurean philosophy. The Epicureans more than any other school valued philosophical argument not for the speculative knowledge it could provide, but for its ability to end suffering and secure pleasure.¹⁷⁷

A related appearance of a case-sensitive approach, outside the confines of the teaching relationship, has been identified by David Armstrong in connection with Philodemus’ work *De*

¹⁷⁶ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 125.

¹⁷⁷ “Furthermore, we must insist that what all argument *is*, in this community, is therapy. ‘Purgation’ and ‘drugging’ are not ancillary to philosophy; they are what, given its practical commitment, philosophy must become. Whatever parts of traditional philosophy are omitted are just those that are taken to be empty.” Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 127. Italics in original. It is worth noting in passing that Skeptic arguments function in almost the same manner, aimed as they are toward achieving the *ataraxia* that comes with having no beliefs. The Skeptic teacher will present arguments counter to the pupil’s beliefs just strong enough to dislodge the belief, but not strong enough to cause the student to adopt the contrary position – a delicate balancing act. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 298-300.

Morte. In this work, aimed at dispelling the fear of death, Philodemus departs substantially from his typical style of writing. By observing the extent to which *De Morte*, much more so than other Epicurean (or Philodeman) writings, gives credit to and is willing to work with non-philosophical or pre-philosophical ideas about death, Armstrong argues that the audience of the work is mixed, likely including non-Epicureans as well as already-converted Epicureans. These non-Epicurean addressees are met where they are, and not berated for failing to have imbibed the full doctrine of the school.¹⁷⁸ A greater-than-usual reliance upon rhetorical flourishes marks an important element in this plan. Philodemus is not typically given to rhetorical flights of fancy, but in *De Morte*, in order to address their particular situation, he concedes much more to convention and to the tastes of a popular audience than was his custom.¹⁷⁹ This change in tone and *rapprochement* with popular thinking represent the commitment to a case sensitive approach in Epicurean thought. They believed their doctrines to be the very salvation of man, and were willing to adjust their methods in order to convey them to the world.

For the Stoics, a different goal lay at the end of their training, and therefore the methods took a different shape. The Stoic sage was not aiming for tranquility or undisturbed pleasure, but rather for total purity of moral virtue. At first blush, then, it might seem as though Stoicism imposes a more rigid system that would require a less flexible teaching approach. This is not necessarily the case, however. It should be remembered that while the Epicureans (and Skeptics) sought a more relaxed goal, they had no less precise an idea of what they were after than the Stoics did. Additionally, the Stoics were no less practically oriented than the Epicureans, and for

¹⁷⁸ David Armstrong, "All Things to All Men: Philodemus' Model of Therapy and the Audience of *De Morte*," in *Philodemus and the New Testament World*, ed. John T. Fitzgerald, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 19. Armstrong gives a number of examples of ways in which Philodemus shows a willingness to work with more popular notions. To take one, he professes to understand and sympathize with the fear of leaving one's friends and family bereaved upon one's death. Ibid, 40.

¹⁷⁹ Armstrong, "All Things to All Men", 20, 27.

such a program to have practical success, case sensitivity is an indispensable tool – as Cicero notes, “one is moved by one method, another by another.”¹⁸⁰ The starting point again is an intimate knowledge of the student on the part of the teacher – Seneca observes that a good doctor will only make a prescription after having personally examined the sick person.¹⁸¹ Seneca explains the matter with remarkable clarity:

Consider the treatments which have been handed to us by which eyes are treated: it is not my task to search for others, but still, these must be applied to the particular diseases and occasions. This one alleviates irritation of the eyes, this one attenuates swelling of the eyelids, this one prevents sudden pain and tears, this one improves vision. It is necessary for you to prepare them, to choose the right moment, and to apply the proper method to each case. Remedies for the soul have been found by the ancients, but it is our job to work out how and when they are to be applied. Those who were before us achieved a great deal, but they did not complete the task.¹⁸²

No amount of medical knowledge can relieve the doctor of the burden of offering individual diagnoses and prescriptions. Similarly, one may have read a limitless collection of the works of Zeno, Chrysippus, and Epictetus, but without the steady, guiding hand of a teacher showing which texts are relevant at which point, nothing can be accomplished. We see at the same moment, then, the insufficiency of texts alone and the necessity of living teachers. A teacher is not required solely because he can explain things more clearly than a great text of the past (any given teacher may succeed or fail in doing this). Rather, need for a teacher, as Seneca shows in a Stoic context, lies in the fact that a text does not know its reader personally, the reader cannot disclose himself to the text, and the text can only repeat the same answer, again and again. Only

¹⁸⁰ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 3.76. This parenthetical observation by Cicero comes after a summary of the variety of different ways philosophers have proposed to provide consolation, and serves as an exhortation to use whichever method is appropriate to the situation, just like a good physician does with bodily illness.

¹⁸¹ Seneca, *Moral Letters*, 22.1-3. In the correction of moral problems as well, different situations require different approaches. Seneca, *On Anger*, 1.6.

¹⁸² Seneca, *Moral Letters*, 64.8-9.

a living teacher in an ongoing, personal relationship with the student can give the kind of moral guidance necessary for Stoicism to be a lived practice, and not an inert theory.

The Neoplatonic school may appear to be the most inflexible of all the schools, and also the most intellectually (and thus least ethically) oriented, a perspective which would naturally lead to an expectation that Platonic teaching would be less sensitive, less flexible, and more rigidly organized. This view gains some *prima facie* plausibility from the fact that a set curriculum of readings was established within the Platonic schools, one that (at least in later days) was not much altered. A reading of the Platonic dialogues in a fixed order, designed to lead the reader along a path of spiritual ascent, was a key part of Platonic formation.¹⁸³ It seems to be the case, then, that key elements of the Neoplatonic teaching process were fixed in advance, and not necessarily open to a great deal of revision according to the situation of each student or the judgment of each teacher.

Nevertheless, the situation was not so rigid as we might be inclined to suppose. Neoplatonism furnishes us with some unique opportunities to look inside the classroom, as we have noted, through the biographical material, and when we attend to that material, we find an interesting case of flexibility lying at the very heart of Neoplatonic teaching. If the Neoplatonists were especially intellectual, then we should expect their flexibility to be of a peculiarly intellectual sort. Platonist case sensitivity takes the form of an open attitude towards the questions and intellectual concerns of the students in the classroom. “Of all teachers,” Lloyd writes, “the Platonist was the most likely to leave room for students' questions; and he did.”¹⁸⁴ This accords well with Porphyry’s famous observation (which he claims to have received from

¹⁸³ Lamberton, “The Schools of Platonic Philosophy of the Roman Empire,” 444-5. A. C. Lloyd finds the traces of this ordered reading in the Neoplatonic commentary tradition, which he sees as presupposing a curriculum. A. C. Lloyd, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 4.

¹⁸⁴ Lloyd, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism*, 7.

one Amelius) that, “Since he [Plotinus] encouraged those present to ask questions, the lecture was full of disorder and much useless talk.”¹⁸⁵ While at this point in the *Vita*, Porphyry seems to doubt the value of this endless questioning, elsewhere he finds more purpose in it:

His [Plotinus'] mildness and gentleness shone forth towards those who questioned him, and he showed his vigor as well. I, Porphyry, once questioned him for three whole days about how the soul is related to the body, and he continued demonstrating the matter, to the point that when a certain man named Thaumasius came in, who preferred general ideas, and said that he wanted to hear Plotinus say such things as would go into a book, but he could not endure Porphyry's questions and answers. Plotinus said, 'But if when Porphyry poses questions we do not solve the difficulties, we shall not be able to say anything at all to go into the book.'¹⁸⁶

No class session, then, was set in stone with an iron-clad lesson plan in advance. For a more developed picture, we might turn to Zacharias of Mytilene, who uses exactly this sort of classroom discussion as the narrative frame for his dialogue *Ammonius*. He begins debating freely with Ammonius, the teacher, in response to some questions Ammonius posed about the eternity of the world.¹⁸⁷ The next day, another student, Gessius, who agreed with Ammonius, raises the issue again, and the class discussion takes off a second time, clearly at the instigation of student questioning rather than the instructor's insistence.¹⁸⁸ Each student, it seems, in both Plotinus and Ammonius' schools, had as much to say as the teacher about the direction that any given meeting would take. Nor could it be any other way, as the object of the lectures was to lead students on a spiritual ascent culminating in divinization. If a student was only at the foot of the mountain, it would be no use discoursing about the peak, and vice versa.

Although the forms vary in different contexts, case sensitivity was a central value in philosophical instruction across the schools. Again, monasticism takes up the same virtue, with

¹⁸⁵ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 3.

¹⁸⁶ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 13.

¹⁸⁷ Zacharias of Mytilene, *Ammonius*, 91-105.

¹⁸⁸ Zacharias of Mytilene, *Ammonius*, 351-70.

a similar devotion. Among the Desert Fathers, this virtue is expressed in terms of the concept of discernment or discretion (*diakrisis*). The importance of discernment is revealed by the fact that it not only receives its own chapter in the Systematic Collection, but that this chapter stands in the middle of the collection (ten out of twenty-one) and is the longest in the entire text. Only the chapters on humility (due to its similarly central position in the hierarchy of monastic virtues) and visions (largely because of a few abnormally long stories) come close. It is difficult to say that any particular virtue was the most important to the Desert Fathers, but no virtue out-ranked discernment, at least as far as teaching was concerned.

The term “*diakrisis*” has its etymological roots in concepts of judgment, separation, and differentiation. Outside of a spiritual context, it refers to the idea of distinguishing things one from another, identifying what makes one thing different from the next, and separating them along these lines. Applied to the ascetic life, then, it means the ability (typically of a teacher or respected elder within the community) to distinguish the particular characteristics of one situation from another, and, accordingly, to determine the proper course of action in each situation.¹⁸⁹ In many cases, this will mean acting according to the general rule, the ordinary expectations of the community. However, it may also involve going beyond (or against) what is typically done in order to resolve a unique case which presents challenges different from those addressed by the general rule. To take a simple example of this sort of discernment, grounded in the ability to tell one situation from the next, in most cases one would expect the monk who eats the least to be the most praised and to expect the greatest spiritual reward. However, in the chapter on discernment, an anonymous elder points out that, “There is one person who eats a lot,

¹⁸⁹ “Discernment at its most general involves knowing how to act for the best in any particular situation – which can sometimes involve acting in a way contrary to general expectations.” Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, 46.

and yet is hungry, and there another person who eats a little, and is full. The one who eats a lot and yet is hungry has a greater reward than the one who eats a little and is full.”¹⁹⁰ The ability to make this sort of careful distinction, taking into account not only the immediately-visible action, but also the constitution of each monk, and then to give appropriate spiritual guidance on this basis is what marked a monk as a discerning master. As this example indicates, there are two distinct elements to discernment in this sense. First, there is the ability to identify what the particular case actually is, an ability (as we have seen among the philosophers as well) reliant upon the personal and open nature of the teaching relationship. Second, having properly diagnosed the case, there is the ability to make the proper prescription, reacting to the specific case in all its concrete particularity, not applying a one-size-fits-all solution. For both of these elements, the monks felt themselves profoundly dependent upon the direct guidance of God.

Beginning with the first of these two factors, there is no way to give case-sensitive guidance without a thorough and accurate assessment of the total spiritual and moral state of the disciple. We have already seen the importance of openness in this regard, and what a vital role that principle played in the teaching relationship. It is important to understand as well that the monks also expected, in a quite concrete way, God’s guidance to assist them in evaluating their disciples.¹⁹¹ On one occasion, a monk falls into sin, but then rebukes the *logismoi* that were attempting to drive him to despair, and thus recovers himself. Then, “The Lord revealed to an elder in his neighborhood that this brother, having fallen, had conquered,” prompting the elder to look into the situation and give the monk his (and God’s) stamp of approval.¹⁹² On another occasion, a monk fears he is in spiritual danger because of the force of the temptation to *porneia*,

¹⁹⁰ Systematic Collection, X.154.

¹⁹¹ “This supposed inspiration by God was the essential basis of trust in the teaching of the fathers.” Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church*, 29.

¹⁹² Systematic Collection, V.47.

which attacked him five times in one night. He goes to his elder and confesses the matter, but the elder “was a visionary, and he beheld five crowns upon his head,” causing him to realize that the monk had in fact defeated the temptations, and so needed only some encouraging advice.¹⁹³ Unsurprisingly, the chapter on visionary elders contains a number of stories along these lines, such as the tale of a bishop who could discern the spiritual state of people by their faces (either “having burned faces and bloodshot, fiery eyes” or “radiant faces and white clothing”) as they approached communion.¹⁹⁴ Another elder could see the Holy Spirit’s presence upon the brothers at the kiss of peace.¹⁹⁵ Other examples abound, including many outside the liturgy as well. It is a little too easy for modern scholars to perform a sort of academic allegory in which we interpret these stories as symbolically reflecting the practical insight of experienced teachers or as purely legendary material developed to create a certain image of the community. Such factors may apply, but emphasizing them too strongly does mislead us regarding the monks’ own mindset, so far as we are able to discern it. There is no good reason to believe that an ascetic elder would not expect actual, concrete guidance, of one form or another, to be given to him by God in such a way as to aid in understanding his disciple’s problems.

Of course, direct divine guidance was not always on hand, and more mundane methods, drawn from practical experience, were often necessary. One method in particular is striking for the similarity it bears to an Epicurean technique found in Philodemus. The philosophical counselor, Philodemus suggests, can sometimes elicit a disciple’s openness (and thus learn his situation) by admitting to being troubled by a certain problem that the student is having, or

¹⁹³ Systematic Collection, V.52. Another story tells of a similar vision, in which an elder absent-mindedly falls asleep while discoursing with his disciple. The disciple resists the temptation to go to bed seven times, and it is revealed to the elder later that the disciple had received seven crowns. Systematic Collection, VII.52.

¹⁹⁴ Systematic Collection, XVIII.46.

¹⁹⁵ Systematic Collection, XVIII.37.

perhaps is suspected of having. By admitting to similar struggles, the teacher can help the student identify with him and feel less embarrassed by his own failings; additionally, by describing how he has overcome these trials, the teacher shows the way for the disciple to do the same.¹⁹⁶ Abba Macarius uses almost this exact technique when faced with a disciple too embarrassed by his own failings to own up to them in the presence of so illustrious an elder. The ashamed monk tells Macarius that he is doing well, but Macarius (thanks to a conversation with the Devil) knows that this is not so, so he tells the younger monk, “Look, I have been practicing asceticism for so many years, and I am honored by all, and the spirit of *porneia* troubles me, an old man!” The relieved brother replies, “Believe me, abba, me too!” After repeating the same experiment with a number of other *logismoi*, Macarius gives the brother a simple rule to stick to, and thus resolves the problem.¹⁹⁷ Whether through divine guidance, experienced intuition, or clever conversation, an elder needed to learn the situation of those he sought to help in order to practice case-sensitivity (that is, discernment). This ability to find out and rightly understand a disciple’s thoughts (not just what they were, but their actual import, the extent of demonic influence, etc.) was so central that some have defined discernment as just being this ability.¹⁹⁸

For the *Apophthegmata*, however, the term is a little more expansive. There is equally the question of understanding what to do, having ascertained the details of a disciple’s situation, a question which also falls within the ambit of discernment. The most basic way in which this could be done in the Desert was through the delivery of the famed “word” from an elder to a disciple. This word was not an abstract principle for all people at all times, but rather a tailor-

¹⁹⁶ Fiore, “The Pastoral Epistles in the Light of Philodemus’ ‘On Frank Criticism’”, 286-7. Cf. Philodemus, *On Frank Criticism*, fr. 9.

¹⁹⁷ Systematic Collection, XVIII.13.

¹⁹⁸ “Chrysostom’s advice is largely based on his ability to evaluate the nature of Stagirus’ thoughts, an ability known as discernment.” Dilley, “Care of the Other in Ancient Monasticism”, 186.

made commandment for a particular person in a particular context. Within the *Apophthegmata*, these words seem to make the greatest impression when they are most precisely targeted. The chapter on discernment includes a saying which begins conventionally enough, with a monk asking for a word, so that he might be saved. The elder responds surprisingly: “If you wish to be saved, when you visit someone, do not start speaking before he questions you.” The monk, “pricked to compunction by the word, made repentance to him [the elder] saying, ‘Indeed, I have read many books, but I have never known such teaching.’”¹⁹⁹ On the face of it, this saying is wholly extraordinary. The monk did not ask how to make progress, how to overcome his chattiness, or anything of the sort; he asked about salvation. What he was told was not about Christ, the Cross, redemption, or even one of the major ascetic virtues such as humility or forgiveness. All he receives is a simple, commonplace Desert principle – keep your mouth shut. The monk, however, is neither confused nor upset, but humbled and awed by this teaching, the like of which he has never before encountered. Unless he was very new in the Desert, however, he had certainly heard the value of keeping quiet many times before and in any event, it is no earth-shattering concept. Nevertheless, this teaching in some way hit this monk squarely at the moment and dropped him to the ground (apparently literally in a gesture of obeisance). It is this sort of targeted speech that gives discernment its greatest power. Even the mundane and obvious, spoken at the right moment, can be profoundly transformative.

Along with knowing when exactly to recall and apply the standard rules, however, there is also a question of flexibility on the part of the truly discerning teacher. This flexibility frequently meant giving different, and even contradictory, prescriptions to different people,

¹⁹⁹ Systematic Collection, X.24.

depending on the circumstances.²⁰⁰ A beginner requires one thing, an experienced monk another, someone who is struggling may require different treatment from someone who is, for the most part, faring well, and so on. For the struggling monk mentioned above whom Macarius counselled, what was needed was a clear and simple rule to follow. Another monk, doing better, might have received stricter requirements, as there were different expectations for monks at different levels of ascetic proficiency.²⁰¹ A number of examples in which the same situation elicits a different response depending upon the context illustrate the point. Abba Achilles, to take one, was approached by three monks, each of whom wanted a net made by the elder's hands. The first two are refused, but the request of the third (who "had a bad reputation") is granted. When the other monks approach Achilles privately for an explanation, he tells them,

"I said to you, 'I will not do it', and you were not saddened, thinking that I did not have the time. But if I do not do it for this one, he will say, 'The elder has heard of my sin, and did not want to do it', and straightaway we have cut off the connection. But I lifted up his soul in order that such a one not be swallowed up in sorrow."²⁰²

A struggling monk, then, might be treated gently in a way that would not be necessary (and, in some situations, would not be appropriate) for a monk in a stronger position.

Abba Joseph, meanwhile, was asked by two different monks on two different occasions (the famous Abba Poemen and an unnamed Theban monk) about whether they should let the passions come in and combat them, or whether to cut them off immediately. Poemen is told to do battle with the passion, but later he hears that the Theban received the opposite instruction. Perplexed, he asks Abba Joseph about the discrepancy, and is told that, at Poemen's request, "I

²⁰⁰ "Discernment undoubtedly includes the ability of an abba to distinguish between the different spiritual capacities of different people and deal with their temptations appropriately." Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, 49.

²⁰¹ Systematic Collection, X.112 describes what is expected of a more and a less accomplished monk, in order to not be defiled by the *logismoi*. The more accomplished monk is expected to cut the thought off sooner.

²⁰² Systematic Collection, X.18.

spoke to you as though to myself [that is, as to an experienced monk]. There are others for whom it is not good for the passions to draw near, but straightaway they need to cut them off.”²⁰³ Again, Abba Ares was seen imposing heavy ascetic labors upon one particular disciple, well beyond what he asked of others. When asked why, he said, “The brothers go just as they came seeking. This one, though, comes to hear a word on account of God, for he is a worker, and if I say something to him, he does it with zeal. For this reason I speak the word of God to him.”²⁰⁴ Along a similar line, the Desert Fathers also noticed that Satan was not above a measure of flexibility himself. As Matoes said, Satan “does not know if he will harvest some with *porneia*, others with slander, and likewise with the rest of the passions. Whichever passion he knows a soul is inclined towards, there he makes progress.”²⁰⁵ That this saying also appears in the chapter on discernment indicates the urgency of the virtue for the teacher. If Satan is going to bend all of his powers towards responding to the specific situation of each person, then the teacher had better do the same!

This sensitivity could take on many forms. Of course many of the most celebrated are the times when someone acts in an unexpectedly gentle way, but the virtue of discernment can be equally alive in the harshest rebukes. Were it not so, there would be no place for frank speech, and yet we have seen that that method was a central one. Pointed criticism can be valuable, and even insults can play a role in ascetic pedagogy.²⁰⁶ At the same time, constant assault in the end only exhausts the subject, and so encouragement is also important. Perhaps the best illustration of this point is a saying included in the Systematic Collection to display Abba Antony’s great discernment:

²⁰³ Systematic Collection, X.38.

²⁰⁴ Systematic Collection, XIV.3.

²⁰⁵ Systematic Collection, X.49.

²⁰⁶ Insults can be of particular value for beginners: Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, 74-5.

Someone was in the desert hunting wild animals, and he saw Abba Antony enjoying himself with the brothers, and he was scandalized. The elder, wishing to assure him that it is necessary from time to time for the brethren to relax, said to him, 'Put an arrow to your bow and draw it.' He did this. He said to him again, 'Draw,' and he drew. And again he said, 'Draw.' The hunter said to him, 'If I draw beyond measure, the bow will break.' Abba Antony said to him, 'Thus also it is with the work of God. If we strain beyond measure in regards to the brothers, they will quickly be broken. Therefore it is necessary from time to time for them to relax. When the hunter heard these things he was filled with compunction and went away having profited greatly from the elder. And the brothers withdrew, reinforced, to their own place.²⁰⁷

This, in a word, is discernment. It is important to challenge one's disciples, it is important to push them hard, it is important even to criticize them and break them down, to be "like a sword".

However, this must not be done in a way that exhausts them and drives them away or breaks their spirit, leading them to abandon the path. The point, then, is to find a way of life that one can actually follow. If an elder sets goals or expectations for his disciple that are too high, he often succeeds only in depressing him, and nothing will be accomplished.²⁰⁸ For this reason, the elder is always looking for a way of life to which a disciple can actually commit and in which he will be strengthened. Even if the load is light at first, it will grow with time as the student grows in ability. Judging such matters and determining the best course for each disciple individually is the virtue of discernment, apart from which there simply is no philosophical or monastic teaching.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have drawn a picture of Late Antique spiritual pedagogy, focused upon the monastic and philosophical contexts. In so doing, we have of course assimilated these two worlds to each other somewhat, and concentrated upon the similarities and parallels, those places in which it seems most plausible to suggest that the early monks were building upon a

²⁰⁷ Systematic Collection, X.3.

²⁰⁸ Systematic Collection, X.9, 66.

psychagogical foundation already laid out for them by the philosophers. This means that areas of difference, which certainly did exist, have been somewhat downplayed. Most obviously, the rigorous *intellectual* training that was essential to philosophy was not a major feature of monastic formation, at least as presented in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Nevertheless, the parallels between the two forms of guidance run deep. Having undergone a conversion experience, the new philosopher and the new monk turn of necessity to personal, therapeutic relationship with a guide. A number of the most important elements of the methodology of the guide (frankness, openness, and case sensitivity) are directly parallel in each case. More importantly, they are held in common between the monks and the philosophers over and against other forms of education in the ancient world, especially as regards sensitivity to the particular case. This leads us to conclude that early monasticism was operating in the same milieu of Late Ancient spiritual guidance as philosophy, and shared many elements with it. The monks were drawing upon philosophical predecessors and contemporaries rather than avoiding philosophical models. Given the genuine similarity between the two paths as options for a dedicated spiritual life, marked off from the rest of society by some sort of conversion,²⁰⁹ we must conclude that the monks made use of philosophical methods of formation.

²⁰⁹ See chapter 1 above.

CHAPTER THREE: SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Introduction: Pierre Hadot and Spiritual Exercises in Ancient Philosophy

Philosopher and historian Pierre Hadot has appeared in passing in earlier chapters of this dissertation, but now his work comes squarely before us. In the later decades of the twentieth century, Hadot set out to challenge the way in which philosophy had been understood and studied since (in his view) the Middle Ages. It seemed to him impossible that philosophy, in particular ancient philosophy, was intended to be simply a body of abstract doctrines and arguments in support of those doctrines. Limiting philosophy to the role of providing systems of ethics, physics, and metaphysics rendered philosophy far too narrow. Moreover, if ancient philosophy was indeed intended to provide a coherent rational account of the whole of reality, it is unclear why so many philosophers seemed to fail at this. Hadot was struck by the difficulty of explaining “the (apparent) incoherencies of the philosophers.”¹ He noted clear inconsistencies in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, which led him “to think that these apparent inconsistencies could be explained by the fact that Greek philosophers did not aim, above all, to provide a systematic theory of reality, but to teach their disciples a method with which to orient themselves, both in thought and in life.”² This should not be understood as a denial of the value ascribed to systematic analysis by ancient philosophy, but rather as a suggestion that it was not the most important factor.

Instead, philosophy involved radical transformation of the whole person: “Yet philosophy near the end of Antiquity was, more than anything else, a way of life. One went into philosophy, so to speak, as one went into religion: as the result of a conversion which brought about a

¹ Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, 89.

² Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, 90.

complete change of one's existence. The philosopher was less a professor than a spiritual guide."³ This conversion began with a certain "existential option" in which one chooses (in a way that is to an extent pre-rational) what sort of life one will commit to – one of virtue (Stoicism), pleasure (Epicureanism), contemplation (Aristotelianism), or some other sort.⁴ On this understanding, Hadot no longer need be troubled by certain inconsistencies in philosophical discourse, because the purpose of that discourse was not to provide a perfectly coherent system. Rather, as Victor Goldschmidt put the matter, the purpose of discourse in ancient philosophy is more to "form" than to "inform".⁵ On this view, it is not a problem if a philosopher comes to different conclusions or reasons in different ways at different times. Each discourse has a unique point of departure and is situated in the context of particular disciples or audiences, and as a consequence may not always be identical with other discussions of the same topic. So long as the process of formation advances in accordance with the fundamental outlook of the philosopher's school, the discourse is not a failure.

In order to explain how this formation was brought about, Hadot introduces the concept that he calls spiritual exercises, borrowing Ignatius of Loyola's term *exercitia spiritualia*.⁶ Hadot considers a number of other possible terms in place of "spiritual", such as "psychic", "moral", "intellectual", and others, but ultimately concludes that none of these have sufficient range to cover everything that he intends to include. "In these exercises," Hadot writes, "it is thought which, as it were, takes itself as its own subject-matter, and seeks to modify itself."⁷

³ Hadot, *Plotinus or The Simplicity of Vision*, 75.

⁴ Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, 104.

⁵ Victor Goldschmidt, *Les Dialogues de Platon* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947), 3. This Goldschmidt citation is one of Hadot's favorites, and he draws upon it repeatedly. See for example Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 73, just one of the many times Hadot quotes this phrase.

⁶ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 81-2.

⁷ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 81-2.

Hadot discusses these exercises frequently in his work, providing a number of definitions, all basically consistent. The fullest comes in *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*:

By this term, I mean practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive, as in contemplation, but which were all intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subject who practiced them. The philosophy teacher's discourse could also assume the form of a spiritual exercise, if the discourse were presented in such a way that the disciple, as auditor, reader, or interlocutor, could make spiritual progress and transform himself within.⁸

As is plain from this definition, this is quite a capacious concept, encompassing a wide range of practices. Everything from physical asceticism⁹ to philosophical discourse and dialogue is included. What occupies Hadot's attention most, however, as well as our attention here, are certain mental practices. Evidence of these practices can be found in a variety of philosophical schools, but it is clear that they are most prominent in Stoicism and Epicureanism. Spiritual exercises could include such practices as the contemplation of death (reflecting upon one's own mortality in order to transform thinking about one's life), examination of conscience (evaluating each day for how well one has lived one's philosophy), meditations (pondering striking maxims in order to fix in the mind the doctrines of one's school and to provide strength to act rightly in a difficult moment), and other practices, all of which will be examined in more detail.

It is important to note that these exercises were able to move fairly easily from school to school, albeit with certain modifications along the way. "For example," Hadot notes, "the spiritual exercise of concentration on the present exists in the Epicureans and the Stoics, with

⁸ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 6.

⁹ The case of physical asceticism in Hadot's conception of spiritual exercises is a somewhat vexed one. Earlier in Hadot's career, he writes that the exercises constitute an "*ascesis* – which must be understood not as asceticism". (Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 82) In the passage cited here, however, it appears clear that he does indeed class some sorts of physical and dietary practices within the realm of spiritual exercises. In another place, he again notes that these exercises may be physical, including even the possibility of breathing exercises. (Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, 93). While there may be some underlying unity that is not readily apparent, it seems most likely that Hadot reversed his position and, in his later writings, accepted the possibility of some sort of physical asceticism as a spiritual exercise.

slight differences, but for entirely different reasons.”¹⁰ A Stoic would practice attention to the present in order to bring about in his soul a vigilance to his duties in every situation. An Epicurean, by contrast, would be seeking to cultivate a relaxed enjoyment of the present, delighting in the pleasures of the moment, above all in the simple joy of being. The exercise seems to contain a certain value that can fit naturally into a variety of philosophical worldviews. It is precisely this ability of spiritual exercises to move from one context to another, reinterpreted and restructured but nonetheless in meaningful continuity, that interests us here. Hadot himself saw Christian monasticism as the successor to ancient spiritual exercises. Indeed, it was through Paul Rabbow’s work arguing that Ignatius of Loyola’s exercises had roots in ancient philosophy¹¹ that Hadot was inspired to use the term “spiritual exercises” in the first place.¹² Christian use of philosophical exercises appeared much earlier than the lifetime of Ignatius, however. Drawing especially on Dorotheus of Gaza, along with Evagrius Ponticus and the Desert Fathers, Hadot sketched the outlines of the Christian monastic use of the exercises.¹³ It is our task in this chapter to fill in at least one section of this sketch, namely the place of spiritual exercises in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. In so doing, we shall trace the appropriation of a key aspect of Late Antique philosophy in a particular Christian community.

Responses to Hadot

Before we engage the monastic tradition directly, however, we must examine some of the major attempts to respond to Hadot’s work or to develop related ideas in subsequent studies of

¹⁰ Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, 160-1. Hadot’s writing, quite openly, always had a certain protreptic element, and on his view, this factor is an important reason why these exercises continue to have relevance, even to moderns who no longer accept the philosophical background from which they arose.

¹¹ See for example the examination of the connections between Christian and antique spiritual practices, including his thoughts on “das beherrschende Meisterwerk des Ignatius von Loyola” in Paul Rabbow, *Seelenführung: Methodik der Exerzitien in der Antike* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1954), 151-9.

¹² Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 126-7.

¹³ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 131-40.

ancient philosophy. Hadot's theories about ancient philosophy are among the more radical reflections on the ancient world to emerge in the last half-century of scholarship. While their reception history has often been surprisingly muted, a number of efforts have been made to develop them. While none has yet reached the level of insight of Hadot's own work, important clarifications, expansions, and qualifications can be found in the work of several of Hadot's commentators. In what follows, we will look at three efforts at developing and critiquing the concepts of Hadot. First, Michel Foucault, in his work on the care of the self in the ancient world, developed the concept of "technologies of the self". Second, Martha Nussbaum has attempted to see ancient philosophy as a sort of practical therapy, as noted in the preceding chapter.¹⁴ Finally, John Cooper, in a recent critique of Hadot, sought to re-establish the centrality of rational argumentation in ancient philosophy, totally rejecting Hadot's concept of spiritual exercises.

Foucault: Technologies of the Self

During Hadot's lifetime, Michel Foucault read and was inspired by his work, particularly that which pertained to spiritual exercises.¹⁵ In particular, Foucault was impressed by "the description of ancient philosophy as an art, style, or way of life; the attempt I made to explain how modern philosophy had forgotten this tradition ... and the idea ... that Christianity had taken over as its own certain techniques of spiritual exercises."¹⁶ Foucault, notably in his *History of Sexuality*, sought to integrate these spiritual exercises into his concept of the "care of the self" through what he called "technologies of the self". By this term Foucault means those

¹⁴ Cf. Chapter 2, above, in particular the discussion of openness, page 131-8.

¹⁵ He mentions his debt to Hadot's scholarship in Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1985), 8.

¹⁶ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 206. Chapter 7 (206-213), "Reflections on the Idea of the 'Cultivation of the Self'", constitutes an evaluation by Hadot of Foucault's approach to the topic. We shall revisit this presently.

practices and techniques “which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.”¹⁷ For Foucault, the purpose of “technologies of the self” is not to enable oneself to perform or refrain from specific acts or to follow specific rules. These moral particulars presuppose a larger framework, one grounded in “the forming of oneself as an ethical subject” which cannot take place “without ‘modes of subjectivation’ and an ‘ascetics’ or ‘practices of the self’ that support them.”¹⁸ These technologies, then, are first and foremost about how individuals constitute themselves as subjects.

Foucault’s analysis of technologies of the self is grounded first of all in his understanding of ancient philosophy. In particular, he begins with the common exhortation to “take care of yourself”. He traces this foundational principle through its pre-philosophical roots as well as through the different schools. In the philosophical context, “It also took the form of an attitude, a mode of behavior; it became instilled in ways of living; it evolved into procedures, practices, and formulas that people reflected on, developed, perfected, and taught,” thus becoming “a social practice.”¹⁹ Taking these practices in their philosophical context, Foucault analyzes several that Hadot had also identified. Most important to him are the related practices of examination of conscience and the attitude of watchfulness, which he discusses in more detail.²⁰ Unlike Hadot’s spiritual exercises, however, Foucault’s technologies of the self are by no means the unique property of the philosophical tradition. While some of the clearest and most sophisticated

¹⁷ Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar With Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, et al. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18.

¹⁸ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 28.

¹⁹ Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 44. Pages 43-50 elaborate on these basic points.

²⁰ Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 60-8. See also Foucault, “Technologies of the Self”, 33-4, 38.

examples Foucault gives of these practices originate within philosophy, he considers those just one manifestation of a number of methods for constituting the self as a subject. Just as relevant are the interpretation of dreams (a practice of which philosophy was skeptical, as Foucault notes),²¹ sexual activity, diet, and household management.²² Philosophy's place within this complex of practices, then, is accidental, not essential. Some of these technologies of the self were developed within philosophical schools, but others exist independently or even (in the case of some religious practices, for example) in opposition to philosophy. This obviously marks a major difference from Hadot's perspective, but while the total system Foucault proposes may not be relevant for this study, his insights into particular practices may well be.

This is not, as it happens, the only difference between Hadot and Foucault. The two were contemporaries in the world of French philosophy and history for a number of years and had considerable familiarity with each other's work. While Foucault's early death prevented a fuller debate,²³ we are fortunate to possess more than one instance in which Hadot specifically responds to Foucault's developments of his ideas. Hadot was critical of Foucault's approach, finding his lack of scholarly rigor particularly troubling. Throughout his career, Hadot was devoted above all to the close and precise reading of ancient texts and to understanding them on their own terms, a devotion that he found lacking in Foucault. "He did not practice philology," Hadot writes, and "did not attribute much importance to the exactitude of translations, often using old, unreliable translations."²⁴ This sort of carelessness appears to lead to some of

²¹ Foucault, "Technologies of the Self", 38-9

²² Thus he refers to "the three major techniques of the self – dietetics, economics, and erotics". Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 251.

²³ Hadot laments this unfortunate turn of events in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 206: "These differences could have provided the substance for a dialogue between us, which, unfortunately, was interrupted all too soon by Foucault's premature death."

²⁴ Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, 136.

Foucault's misunderstandings of key points about ancient philosophy. For example, Foucault speaks of there being in the ancient world, including in ancient philosophy, an ethics of pleasure. Describing the successful practice of this approach, Foucault claims that "the individual who has finally succeeded in gaining access to himself is, for himself, an object of pleasure."²⁵ The term "pleasure" is appropriate in the case of the Epicureans; in the case of Stoic joy, however, using "pleasure" to describe it indicates a basic misunderstanding. The Stoics were actually opposed to any concept of "pleasure", and the concept of "*gaudium*" is specifically introduced in opposition to that of "*voluptas*". In Hadot's opinion, "one cannot, therefore, speak of 'another form of pleasure,' as does Foucault when talking about joy."²⁶

This mistake about the terms "pleasure" and "joy" is connected to a larger issue, that of Foucault's excessive emphasis on the self. The goal in Stoicism, after all, is not to take pleasure in the self, but rather to transcend the individual and operate on the universal, rational level. Hadot explains the distinction between pleasure and Stoic joy: "Seneca finds joy not in Seneca but in Seneca identified with universal reason. One elevates oneself from the level of the self to another, transcendent level."²⁷ One finds joy in turning towards that which is truly good, that is to say towards divine, universal reason.²⁸ As a consequence, any idea of "technologies of the self", insofar as they are about the *self*, are to be ruled out. Hadot levels a similar criticism against Foucault's analysis of writing exercises, by which Foucault held that the practitioner

²⁵ Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 66.

²⁶ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 207.

²⁷ Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, 136. It might be noted at this point that Foucault's focus on the self is somewhat more problematic as regards philosophy than monasticism. As this description of Stoic thought indicates, and as one might find in a Neoplatonic discussion of the ascent to the One, at the highest levels of philosophical attainment, personal identity is downplayed. For the monks, however, even in eternity, the saved and the lost both retain an emphatically personal, individual identity. This is still not quite Foucault's "self", in that this personal identity is not self-enclosed in the same way, but exists to be brought into accordance with God and scripture. Nevertheless, the ideas are closer, and this helps to explain why, despite some faults, Foucault's analysis remains relevant for this study.

²⁸ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 207. Hadot develops his criticism of Foucault in some detail here.

would constitute himself as a subject by writing. Hadot responds that “it is thus incorrect to speak of ‘writing of the self’: not only is it not the case that one ‘writes oneself,’ but what is more, it is not the case that writing constitutes the self. Writing, like the other spiritual exercises, *changes the level of the self*, and universalizes it.”²⁹ The root of this error, this misplaced emphasis on the self, in Hadot’s opinion was Foucault’s desire to show the contemporary relevance of philosophy in a world where much of ancient philosophical physics and metaphysics has little purchase (a desire Hadot openly shared).³⁰ He feared, however, that in the end this strictly aesthetic focus on the self “may be a new form of Dandyism, late twentieth-century style.”³¹ Hadot here is doubtless thinking of passages such the following, in which Foucault defines the term “art of existence” or “technique of the self” as “those intentional and voluntary actions by which men ... seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries *certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria*.”³² The ancient philosopher does many things, but he is certainly not trying to meet “stylistic criteria”.

Two points might be added to Hadot’s critique. First, following Hadot’s remarks on certain aspects of Foucault’s scholarship that appear somewhat careless, we should note the freedom with which he jumps from one philosophical school to another, often without making

²⁹ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 211-2. Hadot also critiques the way in which Foucault reads writing practices as effecting a concentration on the past, when in fact “The fundamental philosophic attitude consisted in *living in the present*, and in possessing not the past, but the present.” Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 209-10. Emphasis is in the original in both cases. See also: “I don’t like the expression “self-practices” [*pratiques de soi*] that Foucault brought into style, and the expression “self-writing” [*écriture de soi*] even less. It is not “self” [*soi*] that one practices any more than it is “self” [*soi*] that one writes. One practices exercises to transform the self [*le moi*] and one writes sentences to influence the self [*le moi*]. It is worth noting, parenthetically, that this is yet another example of the impropriety of contemporary philosophical jargon.” *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, 93.

³⁰ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 208.

³¹ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 211. See also Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, 136 in which he repeats his concern about “dandyism”.

³² Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 10-1, emphasis added.

the necessary distinctions. In one page, for example, he mentions Pythagorean communities, Plutarch, and Philo of Alexandria as offering evidence of a turn towards a silent, listening disciple as opposed to one engaged in a dialogue, all without any mention of the substantial differences of location, time, and philosophical outlook between these three examples.³³ Additionally, he does not sufficiently distinguish between Greco-Roman culture at large and philosophy as a unique way of life governed by practices, methods, and beliefs proper to itself. For Foucault, philosophical exercises are simply one group of technologies of the self, not essentially different from magical, religious, or medical techniques. There may well be some value in considering the ways in which different segments of society constitute and shape the self, but (especially for the purposes of this study) it is vital to make careful distinctions along the way. Ancient philosophy presented itself as offering a substantial alternative to ordinary life, and the ways in which it is different must be carefully observed.

Nussbaum: Philosophy as Practical Therapy

The second major effort to develop an approach to philosophical practice in response to Hadot also took place within his lifetime, although unfortunately we do not have the benefit of his own response to it as we did in the case of Foucault. We have already discussed some aspects of *The Therapy of Desire* by Martha Nussbaum above.³⁴ Considering the book as whole, the central point is the practical orientation of philosophy, the idea that philosophy must lead to real-world changes that positively impact quality of life. A quotation from Epicurus opens the first chapter of the book and encapsulates this idea: “Empty is that philosopher’s argument by which no human suffering is therapeutically treated. For just as there is no use in a medical art

³³ Foucault, “Technologies of the Self”, 32.

³⁴ See the discussions of the therapeutic nature of philosophy and the principle of case sensitivity in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

that does not cast out the sickness of bodies, so too there is no use in philosophy, unless it casts out the suffering of the soul.”³⁵ Similarly, Cicero is brought in as a witness to the Stoic perspective: “There is, I assure you, a medical art for the soul. It is philosophy.”³⁶ Nussbaum argues that this practical orientation represents a common theme in Hellenistic philosophy, and indeed is its deepest motivation. “In short,” she writes, “there is in this period broad and deep agreement that the central motivation for philosophizing is the urgency of human suffering.”³⁷ It is on the basis of this fundamental orientation of ancient philosophy that she builds the analogy that sustains the book (and gives it its title), the comparison between philosophy and therapy. We have already discussed one of Nussbaum’s three primary criteria for determining whether a philosophy does in fact match medical/therapeutic standards (the importance of being “responsive to the particular case,”). Additionally, there must be a “practical goal” (“arguments ... are directed at making the pupil better”) and the approach must be “value-relative” (addressing the “deep wishes or needs of the patient”).³⁸

Building on this foundation, Nussbaum emphasizes the importance of careful, detailed observation of actual human life as the foundation for any theory or practice. For this reason she admires Aristotle, whose work is so deeply grounded in practical observation.³⁹ These observations then form the basis for the arguments and practices that aim to cure the soul. Most

³⁵ “κενὸς ἐκείνου φιλοσόφου λόγος, ὅφ’ οὗ μηδὲν πάθος ἀνθρώπου θεραπεύεται. ὥσπερ γὰρ ἰατρικῆς οὐδὲν ὄφελος μὴ τὰς νόσους τῶν σωμάτων ἐκβαλλούσης, οὕτως οὐδὲ φιλοσοφίας, εἰ μὴ τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκβάλλει πάθος.” Epicurus, Usener fr. 221, cited in Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 13. In this section Nussbaum’s translations will be retained, as the particular usages she employs (“therapeutically treated”, to take an obvious example) reflect her overall project. The original text will be provided for comparison.

³⁶ “Est profecto animi medicina, philosophia.” Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* II.3.6, cited in Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 14.

³⁷ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 15.

³⁸ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 46. There are also seven secondary criteria, at least some of which should be present, but not all of which are required for classifying a philosophy as therapeutic.

³⁹ In particular she seems to appreciate Aristotle’s refusal to reject emotions entirely, a position for which the Peripatetics were attacked by other schools. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 78.

of the book is devoted to technical analysis, much of it quite insightful, of these arguments and practices as they appear in different schools. For the Epicureans, for example, “philosophy is indeed for everyone, everyone with an interest in living well.”⁴⁰ As a consequence, Epicurean doctrines must be articulated in easily-memorable maxims and epitomes so that they can be grasped and put into practice by anyone, even someone who may not fully grasp the logical reasoning that stands behind them.⁴¹ These sorts of maxims for memorization are what Hadot describes as *meletai*, the use of which is a key spiritual exercise.⁴² One can also see these techniques in the Stoics, for whom “philosophy is good practical advice.”⁴³ Self-examination, for example, is mentioned in a Stoic context.⁴⁴

Without delving too far into the details of the argumentation in *The Therapy of Desire*, we can at least make this general point. It is because of the importance she attaches to this sort of argumentation in ancient philosophy that Nussbaum aims to distinguish her thesis from that of Foucault (and, it seems, from Hadot, although he is only briefly mentioned). Describing Foucault’s work on “*techniques du soi*” as “exciting, also deeply problematic,” she faults him for not making clear enough the importance of reason in philosophy. After all, magical and religious practices also form the self in a way, but “what is distinctive about the contribution of the philosophers is that they assert that *philosophy*, and not anything else, is the art we require, an art that deals in valid and sound arguments, an art that is committed to the truth.”⁴⁵ Part of the problem here is Foucault’s own inadequate notion of what reason is and what its capacities are.

⁴⁰ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 115.

⁴¹ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 129, 132.

⁴² For a basic definition of the value of meditation, cf. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 85.

⁴³ “Philosophia bonum consilium est.” Seneca, *Moral Letters* 38.1, cited in Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 337.

⁴⁴ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 348.

⁴⁵ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 5. On the commitment to truth, she continues: “Perhaps that commitment is an illusion. I believe that it is not. And I am sure that Foucault has not shown that it is.” Ibid, 6.

As Nussbaum says in her discussion of Stoicism, “For Foucault, reason is itself just one among the many masks assumed by political power. For the Stoic, reason stands apart, resisting all domination, the authentic and free core of one’s life as an individual and as a social being.”⁴⁶ Nussbaum does not reject the idea of exercises (as Cooper does, see below), but rather wishes to emphasize that “all these habits and routines are useless if not rational.”⁴⁷ In this regard she takes an important step, pushing scholarship on spiritual exercises to move beyond the limitations of Foucault’s (and, it must be admitted, Hadot’s) views and develop more deeply the connection between the practices and the discourse.

Nussbaum’s account is not without problems, however, despite its contributions. The greatest difficulty stems from a misunderstanding of Platonism combined with pressing the analogy to therapy too far, which runs the risk of imposing irrelevant modern ideas upon ancient texts. Specifically, she completely excludes Platonism from her analysis on the grounds that it focuses on a spiritual realm disconnected from practical human concerns. Drawing on the idea of the vision of the forms of the virtues (justice, moderation, etc.) as described in the *Phaedrus*, Nussbaum criticizes the distance this places between what true ethics are and what human beings actually desire. “In other words,” she writes, “the ethical norms are what they are quite independently of human beings, human ways of life, human desires. Any connection between our interests and the true good is, then, purely contingent.” Indeed, the ideal life “might turn out to be a life that is so out of line with all actual human ways of life, and with all actual human desires, that human beings as they are would find it repugnant, or base, or so boring or

⁴⁶ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 354.

⁴⁷ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 353.

impoverished that they would rather die than live it.”⁴⁸ Certainly if that were an accurate report of the Platonist view, the prospects for Platonism as a human way of life would be dim.

But this is not an accurate representation of any actual form of philosophical Platonism. As Nussbaum describes Platonism, there are the forms, culminating in the Good, which happen to exist in a heavenly realm. Meanwhile, we humans (and the rest of the physical world) just happen to exist in a separate, earthly realm that is, apart from the ability of the intellect to perceive heavenly realities, utterly disconnected from them. What this omits is the fact that, in Platonist metaphysics, the existence of the earthly realm is dependent upon the heavenly. Everything is ultimately derived from the first principle (called “the form of the Good”, “the Good”, or “the One”). There is no other source of being apart from the first principle, and return to the first is the proper good of all that is below it.⁴⁹ The entire cosmos is vertically integrated, and the lower is so constituted that it will find its greatest fulfillment in ascending to the higher. Individual persons may be mistaken about their true good, and thus be pained to some extent when they are urged away from illusory goods, just as a child might mistakenly think eating a limitless amount of candy to be his highest good and become angry when compelled to stop. Nussbaum, however, uses the analogy of a sick elderly woman being told, “See this condition of body that you, poor old woman, find intolerably painful and crippling? Well, that’s an example of what health is, as I have discovered by consulting the sort of knowledge that resides in true being.”⁵⁰ There is no chance, given the Platonist account of how the world comes into being and

⁴⁸ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 17.

⁴⁹ An excellent summary of how this process functions in the thought of one of the premier Platonists of antiquity can be found in Dominic J. O’Meara, *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 60-78.

⁵⁰ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 19.

functions, of any such situation arising and it represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the Platonist worldview.

Nussbaum can certainly be excused for deciding not to include yet another philosophical school in her analysis, given the length of her book. The stated reasons for the omission, however, are questionable, and must be noted. Fortunately, similar problems do not appear to arise with the schools she does choose to discuss. Her work still has a great deal to offer as an expansion and correction of earlier efforts, and we have already seen the considerable value of her analysis above. This study will likewise rely upon a number of her insights as we proceed to examine the spiritual exercises in ancient philosophy.

Cooper: The Centrality of Reason

Finally, we turn to the most recent and one of the most thorough efforts at developing Hadot's concept of philosophy as a way of life, namely the philosopher John Cooper's *Pursuits of Wisdom*. As the subtitle ("Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus") makes clear, he is inspired by Hadot's ideas, although he also challenges them in serious ways. Like Hadot, Cooper sees philosophy "as proposing and constituting a way of life."⁵¹ To quote at a little more length, Cooper says:

Beginning with Socrates ... ancient philosophers made philosophy the, and the only authoritative, foundation and guide for the whole of human life, not just as to questions of right and wrong action – a limited part of anyone's life. For these thinkers, only reason, and what reason could discover and establish as the truth, could be an ultimately acceptable basis on which to live a life – and for them philosophy is nothing more, but also nothing less, than the art or discipline that develops and perfects the human capacity of reason.⁵²

⁵¹ John M. Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 8.

⁵² Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*, 6.

To understand exactly what Cooper is driving at, we must be sure to have a firm grasp on his definition of philosophy, as it differs in critical ways from Hadot's understanding. Rather than encompassing spiritual practices and other such things, for Cooper (and, in his view, for the ancients), "the essential core of philosophy is a certain, specifically and recognizably philosophical, style of logical, reasoned argument and analysis."⁵³ It is only at the end of this process of reasoning that one can follow a way of life in a practical manner in the world, only on the basis of this reasoning that the philosopher adopts his fundamental existential perspective. This is directly (and deliberately⁵⁴) opposed to Hadot's understanding that philosophy begins in a certain "existential option."⁵⁵ For Hadot, a Stoic begins with a commitment to moral virtue above all else, and then builds a structure of reasoning and discourse from there. An Epicurean is devoted to pleasure, an Aristotelian to contemplation, and so forth.

As did Martha Nussbaum, Cooper criticizes the extent to which this approach puts philosophical reasoning in the back seat. As Cooper says in the preface, Hadot "seemed to me to omit virtually altogether the central and indispensable place in philosophy (in Greece and ever since) of rigorous analysis and reasoned argumentation."⁵⁶ This point is not without some force, as there can be no doubt that, in Hadot's work, this sort of rigorous analysis is not the major emphasis. In doing this Hadot was reacting against an approach saw philosophy as entirely reducible to its argumentation, with no place left for its actual practice. Borrowing a phrase from Thoreau, Hadot once titled an article "There Are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but not

⁵³ Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*, 17.

⁵⁴ "The only existential option involved is the basic commitment to being a philosopher, to living on the basis of philosophical reason." Everything else follows from this commitment, it does not lead up to it. Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*, 18-9.

⁵⁵ "Philosophical discourse, then, originates in a choice of life and an existential option – not vice versa." Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 3.

⁵⁶ Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*, x.

Philosophers”.⁵⁷ This expresses pithily Hadot’s fundamental problem with the modern study of philosophy – that one can be a successful professor of philosophy without actually living a philosopher’s life. For this reason, Hadot took the discussion in a radically new direction. Nevertheless, a reaction may go too far, and Cooper is right to point out the difficulty, felt with particular force in regards to Platonism and Aristotelianism. It is perhaps not an original insight to note that Hadot’s theories work better for Stoicism and Epicureanism, along with the Skeptics and the Cynics. It is in restoring the primacy of rigor that Cooper makes his greatest contribution, and *Pursuits of Wisdom* provides an excellent roadmap to the arguments by which the different schools grounded their ways of life.

After laying out his intention to put reason at the center of the discussion, Cooper pushes further than Nussbaum, vigorously critiquing the entire concept of spiritual exercises in ancient philosophy; it is this critique that most interests us here. Cooper acknowledges the presence of some practices of this sort, but sees them as a late development, characteristic of the “contamination” of philosophy by religious ideas and approaches.⁵⁸ On Cooper’s view, the fact that these exercises only appear later on (with the exception of Epicureanism, which he dismisses as a “very special case”⁵⁹) argues against their status as an essential aspect of ancient philosophy. These practices are fundamentally “nonrational”,⁶⁰ and therefore, for Cooper, cannot be part of the philosophical life, which is nothing else than the life of reason.

Despite the skill with which Cooper makes his points, there are reasons to doubt the validity of some of his criticisms. First, much of the force of his assertion that there is no

⁵⁷ Pierre Hadot, “There Are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but not Philosophers”, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* vol. 19, no. 3 (2005): 229-237.

⁵⁸ Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*, 19.

⁵⁹ Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*, 402.

⁶⁰ Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*, 22.

evidence for the presence of spiritual exercises earlier than Late Antiquity is blunted by closer examination. As one reviewer has noted, “It is true that Hadot's examples come from later Stoic writers such as Epictetus, Marcus, and Seneca, but that is the case with a lot of our evidence for Stoicism.”⁶¹ The paucity of evidence for spiritual exercises in earlier Stoic writings is likely due to how little remains of those writings, a point that Hadot himself made.⁶²

Second, Cooper uses a restrictive concept of “spiritual exercises” as “voluntary, personal practices, intended to bring about a transformation of the individual, a transformation of the self,” neglecting other practices that he calls “perfectly ordinary ways of getting oneself to understand the real meaning and implications of philosophical arguments and philosophical positions, to fix them in one’s mind and make oneself ready to apply them ... there is nothing at all ‘spiritual’ in Hadot’s sense of the term about them.”⁶³ This is not an accurate statement of the way in which Hadot used the term throughout his writings. Spiritual exercises for Hadot constituted a large category, including even Socratic dialogue. To simply dismiss a large number of these practices out of hand as “perfectly ordinary” is to refuse to fully engage the issue.

Further, it is not at all clear that Cooper understands what Hadot means by spiritual exercises, even with the more limited definition. He claims that “nonrational practices” such as “meditation, self-exhortation, memorization, and recitation to oneself of bits of sacred text, causing in oneself devoted prayerful or prayer-like states of consciousness and mystical moments” held “at most a secondary and very derivative function in the philosophical life.”⁶⁴ It

⁶¹Rachana Kamtekar. Review of *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus*, by John Cooper, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, February 20, 2014, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/46162-pursuits-of-wisdom-six-ways-of-life-in-ancient-philosophy-from-socrates-to-plotinus/>.

⁶² “Because we have lost most of the writings of Zeno and Chrysippus, the founders of the sect, we have far fewer testimonies on the spiritual exercises practiced in the Stoic school than on the exercises practiced by the Epicureans.” Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 135.

⁶³ Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*, 402, citing Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, 87.

⁶⁴ Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*, 22.

is disappointing that Cooper does not cite any passages from Hadot at this point, leaving the reader who is familiar with Hadot to wonder where the idea of “prayerful or prayer-like states” has entered in. It seems that Cooper has leaned too heavily on the analogy with the spiritual exercises of Ignatius Loyola, with which he is understandably dissatisfied.⁶⁵ As we have seen, however, the practices that Hadot describes are not (certainly not exclusively or primarily) aimed at bringing about a mystical state of prayer. They are aimed at transforming the soul and its relationship to the world so that the soul can live out more perfectly its commitment to the doctrines of its philosophy. In this regard, it is also not quite right to call the spiritual exercises “nonrational”, as if they were in some way opposed to or detached from reason. While Hadot can be fairly criticized for under-emphasizing the role of reason, he does not ignore it. While making clear the function of “imagination and sensibility” in the exercises, he also notes that “such intellectual factors as definition, division, ratiocinations, reading, investigation, and rhetorical amplification play a large role in them.”⁶⁶ For example, memorizing a striking expression of Stoic doctrine in order to aid oneself in a moment of moral crisis is not something done apart from reason, for one has accepted that doctrine on rational grounds. Rather, it is a method for forming the will in order to enact rational commitment in a trying moment. In this way, the spiritual exercises that Hadot describes are intimately linked to reason and serve to buttress it (and reason in turn buttresses the exercises, all *en route* to living out a basic existential perspective).

⁶⁵ For example, Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*, 402, end of endnote 4. Hadot himself, it is worth noting, admits that this term is “a bit disconcerting for the contemporary reader”, but is unable to invent a better one. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 81.

⁶⁶ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 82. Nussbaum makes a similar point, noting that it precisely because of the depths of the human psyche revealed by philosophical reasoning that exercises are developed. “The origin of the Hellenistic focus on techniques such as memorization, ‘confession,’ and daily self-examination is in this newly complex psychology.” Nussbaum *The Therapy of Desire*, 40.

In the end, Cooper's book makes a significant contribution to the study of philosophy as a way of life and must be taken into account. Most importantly, he has called us back to the centrality of reason and argumentation in philosophy, something that might be minimized by too strong a reaction in Hadot's direction. His critique of Hadot's concept of spiritual exercises, however, has missed the mark.⁶⁷ Consequently, we may proceed to examine spiritual exercises among the Desert Fathers as evidence of interaction between philosophy and Christianity, without worrying that we are analyzing an illusory concept that was not actually a vital part of ancient philosophy.

Spiritual Exercises in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*: Four Case Studies

We move now from the general discussion of spiritual exercises to specifics. In order to examine the question of whether a meaningful relationship can be said to exist between the exercises employed in philosophical schools and the practices of the Desert ascetics, a close study of a number of these exercises as they appear in the two communities is needed. The standard for establishing such a relationship must be high, although it must also suit the nature of the texts involved. The *Apophthegmata* are not extended philosophical discourses, and so we cannot expect to see all of the same terminology employed with the same technical meanings and consistency found in the philosophical sources. Nonetheless, mere vague parallels will not do either. Clear and repeated instances in which a similar exercise, described in the same or similar terms, is recommended or practiced, aiming at the same or a similar purpose, are needed.

Therefore, let us concentrate our analysis upon four spiritual exercises known from ancient

⁶⁷ One other item here is worth noting. Cooper asserts that Hadot was able to "assimilate" his idea of spiritual exercises "to Michel Foucault's ideas about 'the care of the self.'" Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*, 20. This gets the scholarly genealogy backwards, as reading either Hadot (Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 206, ff.) or Foucault (Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 8) readily demonstrates. It was Foucault who was inspired by Hadot, not the other way around. This is not damning to Cooper's argument, but it is reflective of the carelessness with which he treats the facts surrounding Hadot's theories.

philosophy. In each case, following a brief introduction to how that practice functioned in its philosophical contexts, we will look at the evidence for related practices among the Desert Fathers, examining both similarities to philosophical predecessors as well as ways in which they have been modified to meet the needs of Christian monks. In order, we will look at the practices of meditation on striking sayings, the contemplation of death, examination of conscience, and vigilant attention to the present moment. All of these exercises can be found in multiple philosophical communities, with subtle differences according to the doctrines of each school. The fact that they combine to form an integrated program for cultivating vigilance in both contexts indicates a relationship between monastic and philosophical use of spiritual exercises.

Before moving into the case studies themselves, a brief note on two practices that are not going to be examined here is in order. There is some basis for seeing physical asceticism as a form of spiritual exercise⁶⁸, and Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony and Aryeh Kofsky⁶⁹ have made a strong case that prayer, as it was practiced in monastic communities, can meaningfully be described in these terms as well. Nevertheless, these practices take on a role within Christian asceticism that is so unique to that context and so utterly out of proportion with any potential philosophical precedent that it would be difficult to see philosophy as standing behind the Christian approach. In the conclusion of this chapter we will return to the possibility of understanding these as uniquely Christian developments within the broader category of spiritual exercises that represent a turn away from the strictly philosophical background. For that background, we must turn to practices that played a central role in the philosophical tradition.

⁶⁸ Hadot himself appears to have held different views on this issue at different points in his career. See above, page 158, note 9. See also Foucault's discussion of the role of policing the body in the philosophical life, as a means of controlling the passions. Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 57, 59.

⁶⁹ Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, *The Monastic School of Gaza*, 157.

Meditation on Striking Sayings

We may now begin our study of the system of spiritual exercises with the practice of meditating upon striking, memorable sayings handed down within an authoritative tradition. This practice supports vigilance through the way in which it helps the practitioner keep his principles in view. In Hadot's words, "we must always have the fundamental principles 'at hand' (*procheiron*). We are to steep ourselves in the rule of life (*kanon*)."⁷⁰ It is one thing to commit to the principles of a philosophical or religious system in the abstract, but it is an entirely different thing to prepare oneself in a deliberate fashion to actually act on those principles when confronted with a difficult situation. Speaking in the context of Stoicism, Hadot lays out the essentials of what maxims offer the philosopher:

The exercise of meditation allows us to be ready at the moment when an unexpected – and perhaps dramatic – circumstance occurs. ... 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, 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'. What we need are persuasive formulae (*epilogismoi*), which we can repeat to ourselves in difficult circumstances, so as to check movements of fear, anger, or sadness.⁷¹

It should be noted at this point that the ancient understanding of meditation (*meletē*) encompasses both reflection on striking sayings and maxims and other meditative practices, including the Stoic practice of *praemeditatio malorum* (imagining evils before they arrive in order to train oneself to account them as nothing) and examination of conscience. Self-examination will be examined below; in this chapter, the term "meditation" will refer specifically to meditation on striking maxims.

⁷⁰ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 85.

⁷¹ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 85. One could easily replace the Stoic particulars in this passage with concepts distinctive to other traditions without upsetting the basic point being made about the value of meditation.

The different philosophical schools in antiquity, in particular the Stoic, Epicurean, and Skeptic, produced a sizable number of epigrammatic sayings that could serve as fuel for this sort of meditation. Epictetus' *Encheiridion* is one example of such a collection from the Stoic school, and he (there and elsewhere) exhorts his readers regularly to employ this sort of inner discourse. In one passage, he notes, "Illness is an impediment to the body, but not to choice, unless it itself wishes so. Lameness is an impediment to the leg, but not to choice." He then continues, "Say this in addition about each of the things that befall; for you will find it to be an impediment to something else, but not you."⁷² By repeating this reflection in every instance, one inculcates the Stoic view. In the *Discourses*, Epictetus indicates his deference to authoritative figures (a deference that, in due course, would be shown towards his own writing), by quoting a series of maxims from Diogenes, "sent out before you as a scout,"⁷³ and elsewhere in the *Encheiridion* telling his reader when meeting with important personages to "put before yourself what Socrates or Zeno would have done in this situation, and you will not be at a loss as to how to suitably use the occasion."⁷⁴

On the Epicurean side, the beginning of formation in the school involved the memorization of these sorts of proverbs.⁷⁵ Memorizing key principles so as to have them always ready was in fact more important than the rational principles that stood behind them, as the argumentation had instrumental not absolute value. The goal of the argument was to lead one to the therapeutic conclusion, which could then be memorized and internalized.⁷⁶ In part because

⁷² Epictetus, *Encheiridion*, IX.

⁷³ Epictetus, *Discourses*, I.24.

⁷⁴ Epictetus, *Encheiridion*, XXXIII.

⁷⁵ Ilsetraut Hadot. "Épicure et l'enseignement philosophique hellénistique et romain," in *Actes du VIII^e Congrès*, Association Guillaume Budé (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres", 1969), 347-50. I. Hadot also demonstrates from Seneca that Stoic formation used these sorts of *sententiae* in essentially the same fashion. Ibid, 350-2.

⁷⁶ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 129, 32. Nussbaum expresses some reasonable sympathy for this lower view of argumentation, pointing out that the Epicurean teacher works "to help not just the Brown undergraduate, whose

of this, memorization and recitation in Epicurean communities was a practice not just for beginners, but also for advanced practitioners, as this internalization had always to be renewed and deepened.⁷⁷ There were many collections of Epicurean sayings, and among these sayings, none sums up Epicurean thought better than the *tetrapharmakos* or “fourfold remedy”. The fourfold remedy brings together in a brief formula the essentials of Epicureanism: “God is not frightening, death is not dangerous; good things are easily acquired, evils are easy to endure.”⁷⁸ Hadot likewise brings together a collection of phrases Skeptics could deploy against the temptation to commit themselves to a judgment about a matter: “‘This is no better than that,’ ‘Perhaps,’ ‘All is indeterminate,’ ‘Everything escapes comprehension,’ ‘Every argument is opposed by an equal argument,’ ‘I suspend my judgment.’”⁷⁹ Thus we can see that in each of these three schools, memorable, brief sayings that expressed the school’s doctrine in a forceful way were passed down as means of formation.⁸⁰

talents and prior acculturation make an analytical approach to philosophy possible, but the unleisured, the uneducated, the poor.” Ibid, 129-30.

⁷⁷ Referring to Epicurus *Epitome*, which summarized his doctrines in pithy ways, I. Hadot observes that “L’*Epitome* n’a pas seulement une fonction préparatoire, elle ne sert pas seulement d’introduction pour les commençants ou de survol sommaire des doctrines fondamentales pour ceux qui manquent du temps nécessaire à une étude approfondie. Bien au contraire, ceux qui sont très avancés dans la doctrine épicurienne doivent toujours s’exercer à se remémorer cette *Epitome*.” Hadot, I. “Épicure et l’enseignement philosophique hellénistique et romain”, 348-9.

⁷⁸ Philodemus, *PHerc.* 1005, col. IV. Text in Marcello Gigante, *Ricerche Filodomee* (Naples: Gaetano Macchiaroli Editore, 1983), 260, n. 35.

⁷⁹ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 145.

⁸⁰ We also find at least a brief intimation of a practice of this sort in the Neoplatonic tradition in Porphyry’s *Life of Pythagoras*, in which he approvingly recounts Pythagoras’ practice of providing enigmatic little sayings that encapsulated in a symbolic and memorable way key elements of his thought. For example, “Do not overstep the balance”, which meant “Do not be greedy” or “Do not pluck a crown” which symbolized “Do not outrage the laws, for these [the laws] are the crowns of cities”. Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*, 42. Additionally, the universal popularity of the Pythagorean *Golden Verses* attests to a pan-philosophical desire for sayings material, ripe for meditation. Interestingly, Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Life* 18.83-5 reproduces a similar list of enigmatic sayings attributed to Pythagoras, but does not provide them with the symbolic interpretations Porphyry does. Given that the list is produced shortly after a discussion of the importance of keeping the deeper truths of philosophy from being shared publicly, one is compelled to wonder if Iamblichus has deliberately concealed the allegorical meanings. He may also simply consider the allegorical meanings incorrect; he suggests at 18.86 that some outside of Pythagoras’ school have invented their own interpretations in an attempt to make sense of the commands.

The fuel for meditation was readily available, but the disciple had to make use of it as a daily practice.⁸¹ It is not enough to just read Epictetus' *Encheiridion* or the Neopythagorean *Golden Verses*; one must return to the text day after day, memorizing it (hence the brief and memorable form of philosophical aphorisms) and pondering its content. As Epicurus says at the end of the *Letter to Menoeceus*, "Meditate these things and things related to them to yourself day and night, and to someone similar to yourself."⁸² Again, Epictetus says, "It is necessary to know that it is not easy for a doctrine to be really present to a man, unless each day he should say and hear the same things, and at the same time make use of them for his life."⁸³ The vital point here is "each day". If the practice is not regular, it will not enter deeply into the mind. This could involve daily readings; it could also involve writing on a regular basis. This is what we find in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*. In order to keep the Stoic doctrines alive in his mind, Aurelius reformulates them again and again. As Per Rönnegård notes, the object, after one has learned some philosophy, is to "imprint it into the being of the person through mental exercise (*melétē*)."⁸⁴ It is thus a process of interiorization.⁸⁵ Whether through reading canonical formulations or producing one's own, the practice builds and shapes an inner discourse. When confronted with a trying situation, the doctrines and arguments needed will come to mind automatically, making it more possible to enact them in one's life.

⁸¹ Henrik Rydell Johnsen, "The Early Jesus Prayer and Meditation in Greco-Roman Philosophy," in *Meditation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Cultural Histories*, ed. Halvor Eifring, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 102-3 makes this point on the basis of Seneca the Younger.

⁸² Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 135.

⁸³ Epictetus, *Fragments*, XVI.

⁸⁴ Per Rönnegård, "*Melétē* in Early Christian Ascetic Texts," in *Meditation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Cultural Histories*, ed. Halvor Eifring (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 89. On this need to awaken these ideas in one's life, see also Foucault: "There are the meditations, the readings, the notes one takes on books or on the conversations one has heard, notes that one reads again later, the recollection of truths that one knows already but that need to be more fully adapted to one's own life." Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 51.

⁸⁵ Cf. Johnsen, "The Early Jesus Prayer and Meditation in Greco-Roman Philosophy", 103. "The purpose of the verbal *melétē/meditatio* is to make the *sententia* a constant habit of mind, or to implant the precepts into one's self, so as to have them constantly at hand."

Turning from the philosophical to the monastic in regard to meditation, the formal similarities between sayings collections, which provide the fuel for meditation in the two traditions, are plain to observe.⁸⁶ George Tsakiridis, working within a similar theoretical framework to this study, notes, “Two specific literary genres were especially useful to monks due to their need to memorize and meditate: *Apophthegmata* and *Kephalaia*.”⁸⁷ This is confirmed by Dorotheus of Gaza, who urges his readers to reflect on the *Apophthegmata* (which he calls by the name *Gerontikon*), saying, “Meditate [*meletate*] constantly on these things yourselves, brethren, and exercise [*gymnazēte*] the words of the holy elders”.⁸⁸ Given this need, collections of sayings appeared quickly and became one of the main types of Christian monastic literature, both in Late Antiquity and for centuries thereafter. The later anthology of the texts of the Greek spiritual tradition known as the *Philokalia* bears witness to this.⁸⁹ Late Antique authors including Isaiah the Solitary, Evagrius Ponticus, John Cassian, Mark the Ascetic, and others fill the early pages of the *Philokalia* with numerous *Kephalaia* in a form easily recognizable from antiquity. The form continues basically unchanged throughout the centuries, with Maximus the Confessor, Symeon the New Theologian, and others filling the *Philokalia*’s later portions. Of particular interest is a text that entered the collection by way of a false attribution to Antony. “On the Character of Men and on the Virtuous Life” is in fact “almost certainly not of Christian origin, but seems to be a compilation of extracts from various Stoic and Platonic writers of the first to fourth centuries A.D.; there are passages which closely reflect the

⁸⁶ We will examine these sorts of literary considerations in more detail in the next chapter.

⁸⁷ George Tsakiridis, *Evagrius Ponticus and Cognitive Science: A Look at Moral Evil and the Thoughts* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 55.

⁸⁸ Dorotheus of Gaza, *Teachings* IV.60. See also *ibid.*, V.69: “If we remember, brethren, the words of the elders, if we meditate [*emeletōmen*] on them always, it will be hard for us to sin, it will be hard for us to become careless of ourselves.”

⁸⁹ Mostly available in excellent English translation in Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware, ed. and trans., *The Philokalia: The Complete Text, vol. 1-4* (London: Faber and Faber Press, 1979-95).

view of Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius and Sallustius.”⁹⁰ Although lightly Christianized, much of its content is distinctly philosophical in character. Not only did the form of collections of *Kephalaia* and *Apophthegmata* pass from philosophy into Christianity, but at least in this case, philosophical content was able to make the jump as well.

Even before literary collections of this sort began to emerge, the words of the elders circulated orally within Egyptian monastic circles. The traces of this oral tradition are found throughout the text of the *Apophthegmata*. For example, many sayings begin with the form “Abba X said that Abba Y used to say ...”⁹¹ Whether received through the oral or written tradition, it is clear that the monks valued the words of the fathers highly and wanted to hear and ponder them regularly. The *Apophthegmata* contains a number of exhortations to meditation on the sayings of the fathers or on Scripture passages. Abba Poemen identifies “meditation” as one of the important elements of life in the cell.⁹² Another saying from the same chapter states “A person ought to ruminate on good food, not on bad. Beneficial food is good *logismoi*, the tradition of holy teachers, virtuous deeds.”⁹³ Elsewhere, a brother struggling with *porneia* is told, “As for you, just meditate” (in context, “meditate” appears to mean repeating and reflecting on the prayer “Son of God, have mercy on me”), and is given a saying from one of the fathers to think about for encouragement.⁹⁴ Monks were also exhorted to ruminate on Scripture, especially the Psalms,⁹⁵ as one saying containing a litany of advice indicates: “Compel yourself to the

⁹⁰ Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware, *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, vol. 1, 327.

⁹¹ To take just a couple of the various instances, Abba Daniel tells about Abba Arsenius at Systematic Collection 10.23, and Poemen tells a story about the advice John Colobos received from a third, unnamed elder at Systematic Collection 7.12.

⁹² Systematic Collection, 10.93.

⁹³ Systematic Collection, 10.151.

⁹⁴ Systematic Collection, 5.37.

⁹⁵ John Wortley, “How the Desert Fathers ‘Meditated’,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 46 (2006): 319-20. Wortley notes that, by virtue of the regular use of Psalms in early monastic prayer, essentially all monks would have known the entire Psalter by heart.

meditation of the Psalms – for this will protect you from the captivity of the enemy.”⁹⁶

Additionally, the term *meletē* recurs in many early lists of ascetic practices, indicating that it was an important, specific, and well-known practice among the monks.⁹⁷ As has been shown by many scholars, this “meditation” referred, in Rönnegård’s words, not to silent, interior contemplation, but typically to “a matter of reciting a given text aloud or silently over time,” a text which could be biblical or from the monastic fathers.⁹⁸ This might be done either in a speaking voice or through singing/chanting.⁹⁹

The inclusion of scriptural texts as fuel for meditation is perhaps the biggest difference from the philosophical tradition.¹⁰⁰ Ancient philosophy did not, by and large, deal in sacred texts (in the sense of revealed texts; certainly the writings of Plato, among others, achieved a canonical and essentially infallible status, but on different grounds). Only in late schools of thought such as Iamblichan theurgy, with its reverence for texts like the Chaldean Oracles and the Orphic Hymns, did that sort of an approach take on much significance. Collections of philosophical maxims fit into the model seen above in Epictetus or Epicurus – rationally argued philosophical principles distilled into their memorable essence. Sayings from monastic elders are closer to this, being rationally supported (or, more precisely, practically tested within the ascetic community) principles conveniently encapsulated. Scriptural texts, by contrast, need no

⁹⁶ Systematic Collection, 5.53.

⁹⁷ Per Rönnegård has collected a substantial collection of such lists. Rönnegård, “*Melētē* in Early Christian Ascetic Texts”, 80.

⁹⁸ Rönnegård, “*Melētē* in Early Christian Ascetic Texts”, 82. Ibid, 81-2 gives a somewhat larger discussion of the basis of meditation in recitation. Johnsén, “The Early Jesus Prayer and Meditation in Greco-Roman Philosophy”, 97-8 makes the same point about vocal recitation. Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 122-9 paints a similar picture, but only addresses meditation on biblical texts. Unlike Rönnegård, he does not take into account any philosophical precursors. One finds similar observations in Lucien Regnault, *La vie quotidienne des Pères du Désert en Egypte au IVe siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1990), 110, 115-6 and Wortley, “How the Desert Fathers ‘Meditated’”, 317, ff.

⁹⁹ Wortley, “How the Desert Fathers ‘Meditated’”, 325-7.

¹⁰⁰ Henrik Rydell Johnsén discusses the role of short prayers as a form of meditation, something also more unique to the Desert context. Johnsén, “The Early Jesus Prayer and Meditation in Greco-Roman Philosophy”, 95-6.

authentication outside of their status as scripture. If a text proves difficult, it requires interpretation, but can never be rejected. In some sense, scripture was the privileged source of meditation material, coming, as the monks saw it, from God himself. At the same time, there was also a sense of danger involved in dealing with Scripture, the fear of reaching for something beyond one's spiritual capacity. Thus Poemen tells Amoun, "If you are not able to be silent, it is better to speak of the words of the elders and not of Scripture, for the danger is not small."¹⁰¹ Of course, sayings from the fathers were also open to abuse. Abba Theodore once refused to give a brother a saying on the grounds that "he is a trafficker, and he wishes to be glorified for other people's words."¹⁰² In either case, then, one is dealing with something of value, and one must take care.

Dangers aside, the monks also saw great value in meditation, whether on sayings of the fathers or on scriptural passages. The purpose of this spiritual exercise can be summed up in a twofold phrase: strength against temptation and promotion of virtue. These are, incidentally, exactly what we would expect from the philosophical background, especially the first. In philosophy, much of the value of memorizing and ruminating upon striking maxims derived from the ability of these maxims to provide strength when confronted with a morally challenging situation. Ascetic meditation likewise works to "imprint the words or to fix their meaning, or their implied attitude, at the bottom of one's soul."¹⁰³ One brother was exhorted to keep to his meditations and another to reflect on the Psalms in order to triumph against sexual temptation. Abba Hyperichius states, "Let there be a spiritual hymn in your mouth and let meditation lighten the burden of the temptations that come upon you. A clear example of this is the heavily-laden

¹⁰¹ Systematic Collection, 11.56.

¹⁰² Systematic Collection, VIII.9.

¹⁰³ Johnsén, "The Early Jesus Prayer and Meditation in Greco-Roman Philosophy", 100.

traveler who deceives the toil of the journey with a song.”¹⁰⁴ Again, in the chapter on visions, an elder sees a brother meditating. “Behold, a demon came and stood outside of the cell,” he says. “While the brother was meditating, he was not able to enter. But when he stopped meditating, then the demon entered into the cell.”¹⁰⁵ What is especially interesting in these examples is that it is not just a matter of meditation as a means of building oneself up in order to be able to face a crisis or temptation at a later point. It is also (in these instances primarily) a safeguard against temptation specifically while one is meditating. So long as the mind is occupied by the words of the Scriptures or the holy fathers, it cannot be invaded by alien thoughts suggested by the demons or one’s own sinful inclinations. In this way, meditation becomes a means of maintaining control over one’s inner discourse.

Meditation is not only valuable in the moment. It is also useful for building up consistent habits of virtue, habits that will allow the monk to adhere to his principles regardless of the situation. To combat *porneia*, one elder says that “freedom from care, silence, and private meditation beget purity.”¹⁰⁶ The sayings of the elders, along with scripture, are also valuable for building up detachment.¹⁰⁷ These passages show that regular meditation, whether it be on Scripture or the fathers, was seen as valuable not just in the moment, but for cultivating the habit of virtue as well. The combination of this with the extent to which meditation allows one to maintain focus in the present instant shows the way this exercise works to form a complete inner discourse for the practitioner. Over time, the longer the monk continues to practice meditation, the more his every thought will be shaped by and expressed in the words he reflects upon. This can be observed at a practical level in the writings of various early monastic writers, in which the

¹⁰⁴ Systematic Collection, VII.27.

¹⁰⁵ Systematic Collection, XVIII.38.

¹⁰⁶ Systematic Collection, V.29.

¹⁰⁷ Systematic Collection, XV.136.

words of Scripture are constantly referenced or alluded to, not only in direct quotations (as the prophet Isaiah says, "..."), but also in terms of simply providing the language for the thought the monk needed to express, often with little or no verbal indication that Scripture was being cited.¹⁰⁸

This gives us a fairly clear picture of how the practice of meditation functioned within the *Apophthegmata*'s monastic context. As in the philosophical schools, the monks (from very early on, before any written texts were compiled) valued and passed around the striking words of the elders and eminent members of the community. They reflected on these sayings regularly and recalled them in time of need. Unlike the philosophers, the monks also included the revealed text of the Christian Scriptures as fuel for meditation alongside the words of their forefathers. These meditation texts helped them maintain their focus and enabled them to build up habits of virtue, in order to confront temptations and spiritual challenges. For one of the chief temptations faced by the monk was distraction. Meditation allowed the ascetic to put away thoughts that would take him outside of his cell or place worries about the future or the past in his mind. Instead, so long as he kept the words of Scripture or the fathers firmly in mind, he could stay rooted in the present moment. In this way, in addition to being a vital exercise in its own right, meditation also began to prepare the way for the practice of vigilance.

¹⁰⁸ This phenomenon can be clearly seen in a number of monastic authors, especially Shenoute of Atripe. In Shenoute's writings he constantly seasons his speech not just with scriptural references, but with phrases, words, terms, and turns of phrase derived from Scripture or scriptural vocabulary. Tracking down these brief allusions is one of the more challenging, though also essential, aspects of Shenoute studies. Similar observations might be made about Pachomian literature and other monastic sources.

Contemplation of Death

Philosophy, as Plato famously says, is the “exercise of death”.¹⁰⁹ From Socrates on, there is no means of separating either philosophical discourse or practice from this basic human reality. On the one hand, this was something reasoned about within philosophical circles, and the different schools developed their own doctrines regarding the fate of the soul at death. As with the rest of philosophical discourse, however, it was never disconnected from its ethical implications. The doctrines were only one part of the different schools’ approaches to human mortality. There also developed a spiritual exercise for contemplation of death, which was practiced in various philosophical communities. The implications of this contemplation varied widely from school to school, as one would expect, given their divergent views on the (im)mortality of the soul.

Platonism, with its belief in an immortal soul, built upon the idea of the “exercise of death” by emphasizing death as the separation of the soul from the body (for a Platonist, something desirable, as the soul thus freed from matter can contemplate the Forms directly). The Platonic philosopher engaged in physical and mental forms of *ascesis* in order to separate his soul from bodily concerns, leading him necessarily to courage in the face of death.¹¹⁰ Thus Socrates asks in *The Republic*, “And do you think that a mind given to magnificence and to the contemplation of all time and all being would consider this human life to be something great?”¹¹¹ Porphyry’s *Life of Plotinus* develops the same theme, using Plotinus’ lack of concern for his

¹⁰⁹ “*Meletē thanatou*”. Plato, *Phaedo* 81a, just prior to which Socrates equates “practicing philosophy correctly” with “practicing being dead [*tethnanaī meletōsa*]”. See also Plato, *Phaedo*, 64a, in which Socrates says that “those who undertake philosophy correctly practice nothing else but dying and being dead.”

¹¹⁰ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 67-8. See also his remarks in *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, 105-6.

¹¹¹ Plato, *The Republic*, 486a.

body and even his gruesome death as evidence of his philosophical indifference to physical things.¹¹² The principle is summed up in the *Phaedo*:

... separating the soul altogether from the body, and accustoming it to gather and collect itself by itself together from everywhere, out of the body, and to dwell as far as possible, both now and in the future, alone by itself, freed from the bonds of the body.¹¹³

For the Platonists, then, the imperative is to live the present life in a manner consistent with death, separating the soul from the body as much as possible. Along with this comes a commitment to valuing the Good (approached through philosophy) above any earthly thing, including one's own life.

In the Stoic and Epicurean schools, by contrast, we see a practice more similar to the Christian *memento mori*. These two schools, both of which believed that the soul perished at death, encouraged adherents to regularly ponder their own inevitable demise.¹¹⁴ For the Epicureans, the point of this contemplation was to cultivate a sense of joy and good fortune at every moment. In Hadot's words, the point is "to remain aware of the value of the present instant. It is Horace's *carpe diem*: harvest today without thinking of tomorrow."¹¹⁵ Additionally, contemplating death encouraged the Epicurean practitioner to internalize the lesson that death has nothing to do with us, since it is non-being. The importance of this lesson emerges from the fact that the fear of death brings upon humanity great mental distress, distress that must

¹¹² Watts, *Riot in Alexandria*, 47-8. See also Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*, especially section 1, on how the philosopher showed no interest in his body or his earthly life, and section 2, on his death.

¹¹³ Plato, *Phaedo* 67c.

¹¹⁴ On the basics of the Epicurean attitude towards death as the dissolution of the soul and as not an evil, see A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1: *Translations of the Principal Sources, with Philosophical Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 153-4. Ibid, 149-53, provides an excellent survey of some characteristic Epicurean sayings on death, drawn from a variety of authors within that philosophical tradition.

¹¹⁵ Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, 105. See also *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 125-6. The reference to Horace here is not merely to add literary flavor; Horace was himself influenced by Epicureanism.

be cast out.¹¹⁶ In order to be free from this mental suffering, Epicurus urges his disciple to “become accustomed to considering death as nothing to us.”¹¹⁷ Meditating on death in this context leads to the dissipation of the fear of death.¹¹⁸

The Stoics took a similar approach, but with different implications. Hadot notes that the Stoics taught themselves to value the present moment because at any time “death may interrupt it, it is a matter of living in an extremely intense manner as long as death has not arrived.”¹¹⁹ Stoic philosophy emphasized moral virtue as the only true value, a fact that Aurelius sets in the context of death by reminding himself that even the most famous of men in times past are now being forgotten, and will soon fade into murky legend. As for the great mass of mankind, they are forgotten as soon as they breathe their last. In this context, he sees no value in seeking after such ephemeral things as fame or greatness. The only value left is Stoic virtue.¹²⁰ Because of this commitment to virtue as the only true good, the Stoics worked to precisely define the boundaries of moral responsibility. A key aspect of this delineation was identifying the present moment as the only area in which one can morally act, and therefore the only thing that truly matters.¹²¹ Contemplation of death served to facilitate this attention to the present. Aurelius says, “Perfection of character consists in this: going through each day as if it were the last, being

¹¹⁶ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, III.37-40. See also Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 195, ff. for Epicurean arguments on the fear of death.

¹¹⁷ Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 124. Epicurus continues, saying, “The correct knowledge that death is nothing to us makes the mortal aspect of life enjoyable, not by adding endless time, but by taking away the longing for immortality”.

¹¹⁸ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 194.

¹¹⁹ Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, 105. Again, “The Stoics would always say, one must think that death is imminent, but it was less to prepare for death than it was to discover the seriousness of life.” Ibid.

¹²⁰ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, IV.33.

¹²¹ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 191-4 provides commentary and a number of citations, including Marcus Aurelius and Seneca, that are helpful in developing this idea more fully than the restrictions of this chapter allow. See also Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 171-2.

neither agitated nor torpid, and not play-acting.”¹²² By living thus, keeping one’s inevitable (and possibly imminent) death in mind, the Stoic trains himself to act deliberately, keeping the moral perspective ever in view. Here we find something closer to the monastic approach than we find in any other school, but there is still a real development ahead.

This spiritual exercise continues in Christian monastic literature, but with a significant change of emphasis, one influenced by Christianity’s doctrinal commitment to the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the body, and the final judgment. No longer will Platonic separation of soul and body suffice, as the soul is to be embodied eternally. Epicurean and Stoic constructions are equally inadequate, grounded as they are in the belief that the soul perishes with the body at death. Just as the same exercise is inflected differently in different philosophical schools, so too will it take on a unique character in Christianity. In Christian doctrine, death represents the moment of judgment at which the person’s entire existence is disambiguated. It is essential to emphasize that, in the *Apophthegmata*, these concepts are no mere allegories. There are no grounds for supposing that the monks believed in anything other than real, eternal and dreadful suffering for some and endless, “ineffable joy”¹²³ for others. A new approach to this exercise was therefore required, one in which death is understood as the moment at which the entire meaning of each human life is fully revealed, and this is exactly what develops in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.

To begin, we must establish the presence of this practice in the text of the *Apophthegmata*. While the contemplation of death is not one of the major themes in the sayings

¹²² Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* VII.69. Hadot comments on this text that “The idea of death strips actions of their banality, and uproots them from the routine of daily life. From this perspective, it is impossible to accomplish any action without reflection or attention, for one’s being must be fully engaged in what may perhaps be the last opportunity it has to express itself.” Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, 187.

¹²³ Systematic Collection III.34.

(it has no special chapter devoted to it in the *Systematic Collection*, for example), it does recur with some regularity. There are thirty-six sayings in the *Systematic Collection* that should be interpreted as pertaining to the contemplation of death.¹²⁴ They are spread out over eleven of the twenty-one chapters and are found in the teachings of many different fathers, including Antony, Arsenius, Macarius, Moses, Elijah, and others.¹²⁵ It is often stated that this contemplation is an important element in the spiritual life and useful for salvation. Thus we learn at one point that “when the blessed Archbishop Theophilus was about to die, he said, ‘Blessed are you, Abba Arsenius, for you always remembered this hour.’”¹²⁶ Amma Sarah says, “I put my foot upon the ladder and I set death in front of my eyes before I ascend it,”¹²⁷ and another father says “Remember always your departure and do not forget the eternal judgment, and there will be no trouble in your soul.”¹²⁸ Macarius is particularly direct, stating: “Unless a person ... has the memory of death before his eyes daily ... he cannot be perfect.”¹²⁹ Examples could be multiplied, but these suffice to show that for many monastic leaders, contemplation of death was a valuable, even essential part of monastic practice.

This raises the question, however, of how this contemplation was supposed to be practiced. Given the nature of the text, we should not expect detailed descriptions of Desert

¹²⁴ By my count, that is. There are certainly some boundary cases. One of the most difficult issues to decide was which descriptions of eternal torments and heavenly blessings to include and which to exclude. Depending how one wishes to decide those cases, one could either slightly contract or significantly expand the number of pertinent sayings. I have endeavored to choose only those which were connected with death and judgment in some clear way, considering contemplation of the torments of Hell as potentially being another, separate exercise, overlapping with but not identical to the contemplation of death. If one combines these two categories, one would end up with a much longer list.

¹²⁵ *Systematic Collection* III.2, XV.10, I.16, III.21, and III.6, respectively.

¹²⁶ *Systematic Collection* III.15. This corresponds interestingly with Arsenius’ own last words: “Truly, the fear that is with me in this moment has been with me ever since I became a monk.” *Systematic Collection* XV.10.

¹²⁷ *Systematic Collection* XI.127.

¹²⁸ *Systematic Collection* XI.18. The word rendered “trouble” is “*plēmmeleia*”, which could just as well be translated “sin”.

¹²⁹ *Systematic Collection* I.16. The ellipses are on account of the fact that remembrance of death is one item in a long list of things necessary for perfection.

practices in the *Apophthegmata*, but there are some indications.¹³⁰ From the sayings above, it is apparent that those who taught the contemplation of death expected it to be practiced regularly, or even constantly. It is not immediately clear how this was supposed to combine with the monk's unceasing prayer, and it appears at first that the two would conflict, insofar as simultaneously praying and thinking about death seems impossible. Nonetheless, the Desert Fathers expected the two to be mutually reinforcing. Thus we find an elder praising *hēsychia* with a long litany and then concluding, “Yes, brother, obtain this, remembering death.”¹³¹ In the end, we cannot do much better within the confines of this chapter than to cite the description of this practice attributed to Abba Antony (in the Systematic Collection; we know from other sources that the saying is actually Evagrian in origin)¹³²:

Staying in your cell, gather your mind, remember the day of death, behold the death of the body, consider the misfortune, accept the pain, condemn the vanity of the world, attend to gentleness and zeal so that you might always be able to remain in the same purpose of *hēsychia* and not weaken. Remember also how things are in Hades and consider how it is for the souls there, in what bitterest silence, in what most terrible groaning, in what great fear and agony, in what dread, receiving the endless pain, the internal and eternal tears. But also remember the resurrection and the appearing before God.¹³³

Here the practice is laid out in its essentials. Hold in the focused, conscious mind the thought of one's inevitable death and physical decay and thereby come to reject worldly things and maintain *hēsychia*. This is connected to remembering the pains of Hell and the joys of Heaven – in other words, the final judgment and its consequences.

One element of this picture, the connection with the final judgment, can be confirmed by examining one of the *Apophthegmata*'s methods for inculcating this practice, namely including

¹³⁰ In this regard some comparative study with figures like Evagrius or Cassian could be of great use in obtaining a more detailed framework.

¹³¹ Systematic Collection II.35.

¹³² Guy, *Les apophtegmes des pères: Collection systématique*, vol. I, 149, n. 1.

¹³³ Systematic Collection III.2.

stories about the moment of death. Some of these contain words of wisdom from a departing abba that could have come at any point, but gain added weight given the timing.¹³⁴ These are not our concern here. Others, however, are directly connected with the contemplation of death, since they reveal the true character of that moment. In these, the veil between the visible and the invisible is pulled aside and certain persons (usually advanced monks) are able to perceive the full reality of that fearful instant. Angels and demons rush to the side of the dying and carry off their souls to one or another fate. Some of these stories are sobering, as in the case of an anchorite with a great reputation. When he died, however, a demon was at hand, and “putting the fiery trident that he was holding into the heart of the solitary, for many hours the infernal one tormented him, and he drew out his soul.”¹³⁵ Others are joyful, such as the story of a monk who practiced *hēsychia* and bled to death, having badly cut his foot on a rock. “The demons came and wished to take his soul. The angels said to them, ‘See the stone and behold his blood, which he poured out for the Lord.’ And when the angels said this, his soul was freed.”¹³⁶ Reading these memorable stories, the monk would strengthen in his mind the significance of the moment of death. By pondering this reality, the monk trains himself to think of death not as annihilation or separation of soul and body only, but as judgment, and an intensely personal judgment at that.¹³⁷ The presence of both angels and demons emphasizes the point that death is a fearful moment, but also blessed for the saved.

¹³⁴ For example, Abba Chomai’s final words to the brothers: “Do not live with heretics and do not be familiar with rulers. Do not let your hands be open to gather in, but rather let them be open to give.” Systematic Collection I.27.

¹³⁵ Systematic Collection XX.17. The story concludes with an unknown virtuous man being led away gently angels and saints. See also XVIII.51 for another instance of the demons carrying off a soul.

¹³⁶ Systematic Collection XVIII.47. See also XV.20, XVIII.18, and XX.7 among others. It is interesting to note that more stories exist, in the Systematic Collection at least, about souls being carried off to Heaven. On the other hand, of stories that do not pertain directly to the moment of death, but rather to the state of the dead, there are more that tell of the sufferings of Hell than of the joys of the blessed.

¹³⁷ The individual emphasis represents each person’s place within the more corporate focus of New Testament and other early Christian eschatology. Cf. Jonathan Zeicher, “Death Among the Desert Fathers: Evagrius and

This brings us to the question of the value of the contemplation of death. The Systematic Collection has two clusters of sayings, with nine appearing in the chapter on compunction¹³⁸ and six in the chapter on vigilance. Only one other chapter¹³⁹ includes more than four such sayings. On reflection, it is not surprising that compunction and vigilance are the two virtues most connected with the contemplation of death. Both involve constant, active awareness of the moral life. When death (which may come at any time) is ever-present in one's awareness, there is no room for slackness. Every moment is charged with nearly-infinite moral weight. As one elder says, "The person who has death before his eyes at every hour conquers despondency."¹⁴⁰ This sort of contemplation encourages the practitioner to avoid sin, act morally, and be aware of the presence of God at every instant. Additionally, preparation for eternity was an eminently practical matter for the Desert Fathers. By teaching their disciples these methods, they helped them achieve constant vigilance, living pure lives and trusting in God's mercy.¹⁴¹ In this way, they would be ready at their deaths, the only moment (in a certain sense) that really matters.

What we find in the *Apophthegmata* is a definite program of encouraging monks to contemplate death and invest that contemplation with theological and moral weight. This shows both continuity with and divergence from the Greek philosophical tradition. The same spiritual practice is undertaken, and as in philosophy (the Epicurean and Stoic schools in particular), an important function is to promote vigilance. In this way the contemplation of death is not just an isolated spiritual exercise, but part of a coherent system. Without dislodging it from its place in

Theophilus in the Sayings Tradition," *Sobornost* vol. 35, issue 1-2 (2013), esp. 150-1. The whole of Zecher's article fills out the picture of judgment portrayed in the *Apophthegmata* most usefully.

¹³⁸ This number does, it must be noted, include a few of the boundary cases. Nonetheless, even if they were removed, there would still be no chapter which included more sayings on the topic.

¹³⁹ The chapter on visionaries, with five.

¹⁴⁰ Systematic Collection XXI.40.

¹⁴¹ Zecher likewise connects the contemplation of death to *prosochē*, another term for vigilance, as well as *hēsychia*, a closely-related virtue. Zecher, "Death Among the Desert Fathers", 164-5.

this system, the content and form of the contemplation of death have undergone a subtle but distinct shift to meet Christianity's doctrinal commitments, just as they would differ in Stoic and Epicurean practice. The *Apophthegmata* do not teach the reader to separate the soul from the body or to strive to appreciate the pleasure of the moment or (at least not only) to consider the moral weight of the present, as the Platonists, Epicureans, and Stoics would do, but rather to keep in mind the judgment that comes with death. While the Stoic practice comes closest, it still is not the same as the monastic practice of living every moment in awareness of the final judgment. There is both continuity and development, as we have come to expect.

Examination of Conscience

While all of the spiritual exercises described here undergo at least some level of transformation, both among the different philosophical schools and in their adoption by monastic communities, the practice of regularly examining one's conscience is the most consistent, at least in terms of its basic structure. There is evidence of self-examination being practiced within the Stoic, Epicurean, (neo)Pythagorean, and Platonic traditions, as well as from sources such as Galen, independent of any particular philosophical school but nevertheless interested in the care of the self in a comprehensive sense. The reports across these different communities are remarkably similar in many respects, and speak to a pan-philosophical tradition of examination, a tradition that suited the needs of Christian monasticism eminently well.

The fundamental structure of the practice is found in the Neopythagorean sayings collection (also used by Neoplatonists in the early stages of formation)¹⁴² known as the *Golden Verses*:

¹⁴² "A preliminary moral conditioning might appropriately precede the study of logic ... [which] would be based on the non-technical moral edification to be drawn from such works as the *Golden Verses* or *Epictetus' Manual*." O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 59.

Do not welcome sleep upon your soft eyes until you have gone over each of the day's deeds three times. Where have I transgressed? What have I accomplished? What was necessary that I did not do? Beginning from the first, go through them, and after, if you have brought about worthless things, rebuke yourself, but if you have done useful things, be glad.¹⁴³

This passage was the inspiration behind the tradition of self-examination across the ancient philosophical schools. Seneca, in *De Ira*, draws upon this tradition in order to explain how one should examine oneself, laying out an almost identical practice in a little more detail:

The soul should daily be called up to render an account. This is what Sextius [a Neopythagorean] would do: the day being over, when he retired for his nightly rest, he questioned his soul: 'What evil have you cured yourself of today? What vice have you struggled against? In what area are you better?' ... What therefore is finer than to examine one's conduct during the whole day? How good the sleep which follows upon this review of oneself, how tranquil, how deep, how free from worry, when the soul has either been praised or admonished and the hidden investigator and censor has examined one's morals? I make use of this power and daily put my cause before myself. When the light is taken from sight and my wife has fallen silent, aware of my practice, I scrutinize my whole day and reflect upon what I have done and said. I hide nothing from myself, and I pass over nothing.¹⁴⁴

In his discussions of the examination of conscience, Epictetus twice explicitly quotes the *Golden Verses*, continuing in the tradition of grounding self-examination on Pythagoras' authority.¹⁴⁵

We find the same reliance upon the *Golden Verses* in Neoplatonism as well. Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras* depicts Pythagoras as treating the passions of the soul in a number of ways, some of which seem more magical than philosophical.¹⁴⁶ Porphyry has Pythagoras recommending self-examination, quoting this same passage from the *Golden Verses*.¹⁴⁷ Iamblichus, in his *On the Pythagorean Life*, gives a similar account, although without the direct reference to the *Golden*

¹⁴³ *Golden Verses*, 40-4.

¹⁴⁴ Seneca, *On Anger* III.36.1-3. Seneca also, less poetically, commends the practice of examination of conscience at *Moral Letters* 28.10.

¹⁴⁵ Epictetus, *Discourses* III.10, IV.6.

¹⁴⁶ Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*, 30, for example, speaks of Pythagoras using music to "charm" (*katekēlei*) "the passions of the soul" (*ta psychika pathē*) and *ibid.*, 33, refers to the use of "incantations and magics" (*epōdais kai mageiais*) as well. Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Life*, 25 records the same practice of musically treating souls.

¹⁴⁷ Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*, 40.

Verses.¹⁴⁸ Finally, Galen, independent of any particular philosophical school, describes a related practice, that of turning over the diagnosis of one's passions to trusted and reliable men, themselves free from passions, and likewise references the Pythagorean tradition.¹⁴⁹ The basic elements include: in the morning and/or evening (both seems to be the most widely attested), make a searching examination of one's conduct, evaluating both what one has done right and done wrong. In the event of a morning examination, one is to look forward to the day ahead and plan for right conduct in advance.¹⁵⁰

The different schools naturally instantiated this exercise in their own unique ways. In some instances, particularly within the Stoic school, the practice of writing down the content of one's self-examination provided a literary quality, as well as a means of externalizing one's faults. We find this most prominently in the case of the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, which, among a variety of spiritual exercises, includes both calls to examination and instances of it. He urges himself to constantly interrogate his soul: "'To what end am I now using my soul?' At each moment ask myself this."¹⁵¹ Again, he asks himself, "How have you conducted yourself up

¹⁴⁸ Iamblichus at one point (*On the Pythagorean Life*, 29.164-6) records a practice of recalling the events of the previous day which appears to be simply a memory exercise, not a moral or spiritual one. Later on, however (*On the Pythagorean Life*, 35.256), he makes reference to an explicitly moral examination.

¹⁴⁹ Galen, "The Diagnosis and Cure of the Soul's Passions", VI. Entrusting others with the care of one's soul presupposes having made some sort of self-examination first, in order to seek their advice. Johan C. Thom, ed. and trans., *The Pythagorean Golden Verses, with Introduction and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 163 notes a number of additional ancient authors, not all of whom we can consider here, who cite Golden Verses 40-4, including Ausonius, Themistius, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Plutarch, and Diogenes Laertius, along with a number of other possible allusions. He rightly identifies these lines as "without a doubt the most celebrated part of the *Golden Verses*." For more detail on the Pythagorean practice and its reception, see Thom, *The Pythagorean Golden Verses*, 163-7. Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 50 notes the connection between the Pythagorean and Stoic practice of twice-daily examination.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Foucault's discussion of morning and evening examination. Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 60-2. We might also mention Hierocles of Alexandria. Hierocles does not specifically recommend examination upon waking, but he does comment extensively on the importance of reflection before action (Hierocles, *Commentary on the Golden Verses of the Pythagoreans*, 14 and 18). In chapter 18, he specifically connects this to the evening reflection (the subject of the following chapter), indicating that one of the virtues of careful consideration before action is that it makes one's evening reflections more pleasant.

¹⁵¹ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* V.11.

to the present with respect to gods, parents, brothers, wife, children, teachers, tutors, friends, relatives, servants? Has this been your way thus far towards all: to neither do nor say anything unlawful?”¹⁵² He also rouses himself to the morning preparatory examination, as he writes, “Early in the morning say to yourself, ‘I shall encounter people who are officious, ungrateful, violent, treacherous, slanderous, anti-social...’” and goes on to elaborate the proper way to respond.¹⁵³ Elsewhere in the *Meditations*, we find the results of Aurelius’ searching examinations, and he does not spare himself from serious criticism. As a check to pretension, he reminds himself: “to many others and to yourself, it has become clear that you are far from philosophy”.¹⁵⁴ Or, again, “Remember how long you have kept putting these matters off, and how often, having received time from the gods, you have not put it to use. It is necessary for you to now recognize what sort of universe you are part of.”¹⁵⁵ Compelling oneself to write down the content of such self-examinations can be valuable simply as a matter of enforcing attention, like taking notes at a lecture. There is also, however, a more profound value, which Hadot points out in a discussion of the *Life of Antony*, in which Antony recommends the writing down of one’s errors in order to simulate presenting them before another. “This,” Hadot notes, “is an invaluable psychological remark: the therapeutic value of the examination of conscience will be greater if it is externalized by means of writing. We would be ashamed to commit misdeeds in public, and writing gives us the impression that we are in public.”¹⁵⁶ In this way the *Meditations*

¹⁵² Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* V.31.

¹⁵³ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* II.1. Given Aurelius’ familiarity with Epictetus (*Meditations* 1.7 acknowledges the debt), he may well have been drawing on the earlier Stoic’s advice at *Discourses* IV.6, at which point Epictetus recommends morning preparations. Coming from a much later, and theurgic-Neoplatonist perspective, Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Life*, 21.95-6 describes something quite similar – the Pythagoreans were supposed to go for a quiet, reflective walk to prepare themselves to meet the day. Porphyry likewise suggests the morning preparatory examination (combined with the evening review) at *Life of Pythagoras*, 40.

¹⁵⁴ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* VIII.1.

¹⁵⁵ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* II.4. The end of this passage sets this reproach in the context of the remembrance of death as well, as Aurelius reminds himself that time is passing by, time which will not return.

¹⁵⁶ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 243-4.

(even if, as is quite possible, they were never meant to be read) still functioned for Aurelius as a means of externalizing his thoughts, including his faults, as if putting them before an audience.

For the Epicureans, by contrast, this externalization was a much more direct matter. They did not need to write things down or verbalize them to themselves in order to create a simulated externalization. They engaged in a regular practice of confession, as we have already seen, a practice by which they liberated themselves from the sufferings of guilt (freedom from suffering being a primary objective in Epicureanism), reminded themselves of their philosophical commitments, and provided the opportunity for the correction of faults.¹⁵⁷ Were it not for the practice of confession and correction within Epicureanism, we would scarcely know of their practice of examination of conscience. Fortunately, as Hadot has pointed out, “Although this is not stated explicitly in the texts, we can reasonably assume that the examination of conscience was practiced within the Epicurean school, for it was virtually inseparable from the confession and fraternal correction which the school considered so important.”¹⁵⁸ It is impossible to have confession without at least some form of examination, either developed or rudimentary, and so we learn of the Epicurean practice at second hand.

We have seen thus far some indications of the goal of examination of conscience. For the Epicureans, it is a necessary element in the treatment of the suffering caused by guilt. For Stoics and others, it is aimed at constantly re-orienting oneself upon the path of virtue. This could entail a tallying up of specific errors, their frequency, etc. Epictetus appears to tend in this direction which he asks his reader to take note of whether he gets angry every day, every other day, every third day, every month, and so forth, in order to observe the progress in the habit of

¹⁵⁷ Cf. the discussion of radical openness in chapter 2.

¹⁵⁸ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 199.

virtue.¹⁵⁹ However, the self-accusations observed in Aurelius' meditations seem more representative. The Emperor does not so much add up instances of each sin as evaluate where he stands in regard to his total rule of life. In Foucault's words, the object is "to strengthen, on the basis of the recapitulated and reconsidered verification of a failure, the rational equipment that ensures a wise behavior."¹⁶⁰ This is connected to Foucault's observation that, as regards sexual behavior, the ancient world was more concerned with the relationship to the self than with specific acts of transgression.¹⁶¹ This leads us to the real therapeutic value of the examination of conscience and its place within the larger scheme of spiritual exercises. As with the other exercises we have studied, it is not practiced in a vacuum, for its own sake. Rather, precisely by preparing for the trials of the day (the morning examination) and critically reflecting on how one has conducted oneself during the day (the examination before sleep), one trains oneself to keep the rule of life constantly in view, living each moment in a focused manner, aware of its philosophical (in the richest sense of that word) ramifications. In short, examination of conscience is a step towards the practice of vigilance, the crowning spiritual exercise in philosophy, and, as we shall presently see, in Christian asceticism as well. Thus Hadot observed, "Attention to the self, concentration on the present, and the thought of death were constantly linked together within the monastic tradition, as they had been in secular philosophy," and

¹⁵⁹ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 2.18.

¹⁶⁰ Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 62. Or, for Hadot, "it was much less a matter of keeping a score – be it positive or negative – of the soul's states than of having a means to reestablish self-conscious, self-attention, and the power of reason." Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 201.

¹⁶¹ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 30-2. For a classical treatment of the subject of pre-Christian Roman attitudes towards sexuality, see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 5-32. For a substantial recent development, especially notable for the emphasis laid upon the connection between slavery and sexuality, see Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 19-79.

“attention to the self presupposes the practice of examination of conscience.”¹⁶² Self-examination is a necessary prerequisite to attention to the present moment; without it, such attention would be unreflective and aimless.

Turning to the *Apophthegmata*, there is significant evidence of the exercise of examination of conscience being practiced within the Egyptian ascetic community. The abbas exhorted their disciples and each other again and again to examine themselves. Antony, as part of a string of exhortations, says, “Let us examine if we have become worthy of God.”¹⁶³ Poemen says, “Then let us go into our cell and, sitting there, let us remember our sins, and the Lord will go with us in all things.”¹⁶⁴ Poemen practiced what he preached as well, according to another saying: “They said concerning Abba Poemen that when he was going to go to the *synaxis*, he sat scrutinizing his thoughts for an hour, and thus he would go out.”¹⁶⁵ We similarly hear of how “At one time while Abba John Colobos was sitting in front of the church, the brethren surrounded him and were examining their thoughts.”¹⁶⁶ Some fathers even called for this practice to be essentially constant. As one put it, “Do not do anything without having first examined your heart as to whether what you are about to do is in accordance with God.”¹⁶⁷ Unsurprisingly, then, the communities described in the *Apophthegmata* were ones in which a regular practice of rigorous self-examination was expected and emphasized.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶² Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 243. Cf. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 134: “Vigilance and self-attention clearly presuppose the practice of examining one’s conscience.”

¹⁶³ Systematic Collection III.1. It is worth noting that in the same saying, he also encourages the monks to “keep vigil”, an indication of the relationship of examination and vigilance.

¹⁶⁴ Systematic Collection III.27.

¹⁶⁵ Systematic Collection XI.58.

¹⁶⁶ Systematic Collection XVI.4. It appears from the context that brothers were examining their thoughts in order to ask Abba John about them.

¹⁶⁷ Systematic Collection XXI.22.

¹⁶⁸ David Brakke, “Origins and Authenticity: Studying the Reception of Greek and Roman Spiritual Traditions in Early Christian Monasticism,” in *Beyond Reception: Mutual Influences between Antique Religion, Judaism, and Early Christianity*, edited by David Brakke, et al. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2006), 182-6 offers a discussion on the scrutiny of the *logismoi* in Evagrius and its background in Stoic thought on *phantasiai* which provides some helpful

In order to undertake the examination of one's conscience, however, the fathers taught that *hēsychia* was an essential prerequisite. *Hēsychia* as defined by the English translators of the *Philokalia* is “a state of inner tranquility or mental quietude and concentration which arises in conjunction with, and is deepened by, the practice of pure prayer and the guarding of heart and intellect. Not simply silence, but an attitude of listening to God and openness towards Him.”¹⁶⁹ This inner stillness was among the most critical and sought-after achievements of the Desert; indeed, in a certain sense, the point of retreating to the Desert was precisely to be able to attain *hēsychia*. Without it, the Desert Fathers felt that it was not possible to maintain the focus necessary for real introspection. We see this in several of the sayings in the chapter on *hēsychia*. There is the story of three friends who become monks, two of whom lead active lives, the third dwelling in silence. When the first two fall into difficulties, they visit the third, who performs a demonstration, pouring water into a bowl. At first, the water ripples, but it eventually becomes still, allowing the monks to see their reflections. “So is the person who is in the midst of men,” the third monk says, “because of the tumult he cannot see his own sins. But when he practices *hēsychia*, especially in the Desert, then he sees his defects.”¹⁷⁰ Another elder says, “Just as nothing green ever sprouts up from a well-trodden road, not even if you should sow seed, because the place is trampled, so also it is with us. Practice *hēsychia* apart from all business and

background. Briefly, while there are distinctive Christian developments (most importantly the role of demons), there are clear similarities both of language and content between the monastic and Stoic approaches to the thoughts.

¹⁶⁹ Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware, *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, vol. 1, 365. It is this placing oneself in the presence of God, achieved through *hēsychia*, that Thom identifies as the key difference between Christian and philosophical self-examination (although he does acknowledge that the philosophical practice “clearly is a precursor of the early Christian practices of self-examination and confession”), seeing the philosophical practice as more of an “internal dialogue”. (Thom, *The Pythagorean Golden Verses*, 164) While this point has some force, and he is correct that we should not be too hasty in assimilating the Christian and philosophical practice, we should also not be too quick to dismiss the importance of the presence of God in the philosophical tradition, albeit a presence felt in a very different way. We shall look further at the remembrance of God presently, when we consider attention to the present moment.

¹⁷⁰ Systematic Collection II.29.

you will see growing things which are within you that you did not see, since you were treading upon them.”¹⁷¹ That chapter concludes with a litany in praise of *hēsychia*, including the epithet “O *hēsychia*, mirror of sins, showing to a person his faults.”¹⁷² It is not hard to see why the virtue of reflective, attentive stillness was seen as necessary for examining one’s thoughts. So long as one is engaged in conversation or strenuous activity, the mind wanders from one subject to the next. It is only in a context of silence, both literal¹⁷³ and spiritual, that one can attend to the inner workings of one’s own mind sufficiently to weigh one’s moral state. Once in a state of *hēsychia*, however, the practitioner can attend to even the smallest thoughts, temptations, and actions.

Unfortunately we have relatively little in the way of direct description of what exactly this exercise was supposed to look like. As with the contemplation of death, there is only one saying that gives anything like a technical description, and it is brief and vague, even more so than in the case of remembrance of death. This should not come as any surprise, given the nature of the *Apophthegmata* as a text. It is not a complete handbook for do-it-yourself asceticism. Rather, it was a teaching tool and fuel for the exercise of meditation within a living, largely oral tradition. The compilers and early readers of these sayings would have already been aware of what it meant to be told “examine your thoughts”, because they would have learned it from their abbas directly. For this reason, the *Apophthegmata* can refer to spiritual practices in passing without giving a detailed technical explanation. Because of this factor, all we get is the following passage: “An elder said, ‘A monk ought to make an account of himself each evening

¹⁷¹ Systematic Collection II.33.

¹⁷² Systematic Collection II.35.

¹⁷³ At least in terms of their ideal, the monks had the highest of standards for the literal silence they felt necessary in order to achieve inner stillness. Abba Arsenius claimed that rustling reeds and chirping birds were sufficient to remove *hēsychia* from the heart of the monk. Systematic Collection II.8.

and each morning: ‘which of the things that God wishes did I not do, and which of the things he wishes did I do?’ And thus examining himself, he ought to repent his whole life long.”¹⁷⁴ Brief though the saying is, it reflects a number of interesting parallels with the philosophical tradition. Most obviously, just as the Pythagorean tradition, in which so many philosophical allusions to self-examination were grounded, recommended both a morning and evening interrogation, so too the monastic. Also, unlike the examination of conscience many modern Christians are accustomed to making in preparation for sacramental confession, the *Apophthegmata* joins the philosophers in recommending a review of what one has done right along with one’s errors. This is in keeping with the emphasis in the ancient practice, both monastic and philosophical, on evaluating one’s total spiritual state through self-examination, as opposed to simply tallying sins.¹⁷⁵ Similarly, in addition to exposing particular errors, examination of conscience is tied to the fostering of a general spiritual attitude. For the monks, this included an attitude of perpetual repentance, unknown in philosophy. Both, though, are aiming at forming the person in a comprehensive manner.

At this point, we can go no farther in studying the examination of conscience in the Desert context without taking into account its connection to confession. We saw earlier that our primary evidence for self-examination among the Epicureans consists in their practice of confessing their faults to their friends and teachers within the Epicurean philosophical community and receiving rebukes from them. Since it would not be possible to make such a confession without a prior examination, we can assume its existence, albeit with less detail than in other cases.¹⁷⁶ In the Desert, likewise the references to confession far outpace the references

¹⁷⁴ Systematic Collection XI.91.

¹⁷⁵ Although, as we shall see below, for the Desert Fathers there certainly was plenty of sin-tallying.

¹⁷⁶ One might also mention the Desert practice of weeping for one’s sins as evidence of examination of conscience. Many sayings pertinent to this cluster in the chapter on compunction, for obvious reasons. While this compunction

to examination itself. Most of the occasions on which examination is directly mentioned have been addressed above. To list anything even close to all the allusions to confession, by contrast, would be far outside the bounds of this chapter, and we have already considered monastic confession above in the examination of the issue of radical openness. For the moment, it is sufficient to note that exhortations for monks to reveal their thoughts and deeds to their elders and stories about the results of such revelations are a constant throughout the *Apophthegmata*. Sayings of this sort occur in chapter after chapter, including those on hospitality, love, forbearance, humility, vigilance, sexual sin,¹⁷⁷ and more. Unlike in the case of the remembrance of death, which occurred in a variety of contexts, but with a couple of key clusters, the imperative to reveal one's thoughts to an experienced elder was a constant theme that was deemed relevant to every virtue and vice.

Two characteristics of monastic confession are important here. The first is that it was not, by and large, practiced among equals, as it often was among advanced Epicureans, but was rather a means for experienced elders in the community to help form younger members in accordance with the expectations of Desert ascetic life. There is no indication that these elders were ordained priests, as later practices might lead us to expect. The Desert exercise, then, was not so much grounded in sacramental efficacy as psychological formation. Directly tied to this is the second distinctive aspect of monastic confession, the total openness and searching honesty that was expected of the disciple. The confession was supposed to be detailed and all-inclusive. We are reminded again of Abba Antony's recommendation, perhaps slightly exaggerated, that, "If possible, the monk ought to confide in the elders how many steps he takes or how many

is to some degree a generalized feeling, distinct from any individual sin, it does necessitate at least some reflective thought on the monk's past actions.

¹⁷⁷ Systematic Collection XIII.5, XVII.5, XVI.23, XV.7, XI.50, V.4 respectively, among many others.

drops he drinks in his cell, in case he is making a mistake in those matters.”¹⁷⁸ It is only within the context of this sort of total openness between disciple and spiritual father that the kind of instruction and formation that the Desert communities sought could be achieved, as without it, it would not be possible to provide the kind of advice and counsel sensitive to the intricacies of the individual situation that was required.¹⁷⁹ It is obvious that this kind of radical openness and honesty would not be possible without constant attention to the self and reflective examination of each day; indeed, of each moment.

This gives us the beginning of a picture of the value of self-examination in the eyes of the Desert Fathers. Certainly the way in which it prepared the monk for confession to (and correction from) his abba must be central. However, there is more to the matter, as can be seen from the repeated references to the *logismoi* in the sayings on examination and confession. As we saw above, the demons are pleased by the hiding of *logismoi*. It is the *logismoi* as much as any sinful acts that are confessed and the monks are exhorted to “purify your *logismoi* through confession.”¹⁸⁰ The direct target of both examination and the confession that flows from it, then, is that constant stream of nattering thoughts that draws the monk away from his vocation – sometimes by direct temptation to sin, but at least as often simply by distraction and discouragement. It was the chatter of the thoughts that always posed the greatest danger to the monk pursuing *hēsychia*, much more so than any physical noise. As we saw, *hēsychia* is in one sense the necessary prerequisite for self-examination, but insofar as examination provides the means to combat the *logismoi*, it also functions as the safeguard of *hēsychia*. This mutually-reinforcing connection draws our attention back again to the exercise of vigilance, one closely

¹⁷⁸ Systematic Collection XI.2.

¹⁷⁹ The issue of case sensitivity is likewise relevant here once again, grounded in Martha Nussbaum’s criterion that a genuinely therapeutic philosophy be “responsive to the particular case.” Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 46.

¹⁸⁰ Systematic Collection XI.50.

related to *hēsychia*. The connection between *hēsychia* and vigilance is evident in the saying of one elder, which includes among three things that are fitting for a monk “silence with vigilance.”¹⁸¹ A few sayings later, we see the almost-identical pairing of “*hēsychia* with vigilance” commended;¹⁸² clearly the two virtues were natural partners. Stillness of mind and lack of distraction lead directly into careful attention to the present moment and one’s obligations in it, as well as to the monk’s status before God. In addition, by practicing a regular examination of conscience, the ascetic trains himself to see every action in light of his rule of life, his *kanōn*. At first perhaps he sees his actions in this way only reflectively, but in time, as noted above, he is told, “Do not do anything without having first examined your heart.”¹⁸³ When the monk begins to live up to this exhortation, he becomes truly vigilant and attentive to the present moment, reading each and every circumstance in the light of his moral obligations and his conviction of the presence of God.

To conclude these reflections on the exercise of self-examination in ancient philosophy and the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, then, we may say that there are a number of key parallels. Most of the philosophical testimonies refer to a daily examination, first in the morning to prepare for the day, and then again in the evening, reflecting back upon it. In the most precise saying on the Desert practice, the monk is told to follow this same approach. Again, the philosophical communities sought ways to take the fruits of self-examination and externalize them in one way or another to increase one’s awareness and sense of shame in having committed unworthy actions. Among the Stoics, this could take the form of writing down the results of one’s examination; among the Epicureans, it was a matter of admitting one’s faults before the group

¹⁸¹ Systematic Collection XI.120.

¹⁸² Systematic Collection XI.124.

¹⁸³ Systematic Collection XXI.22.

and receiving correction. While the *Apophthegmata* does not provide evidence of writing practices (for that we must turn to other ascetic literature such as the *Life of Antony*, in which the saint advises the brothers to write down their sins in order to cultivate the same shame as if one were telling them to someone else),¹⁸⁴ confession with correction was a central part of the monastic approach. In this way the monks also were able to externalize their sins in order to confront them. There is a key difference from the Epicurean practice in that in the main, Desert confession went along vertical lines of authority rather than horizontal lines of friendship, and was thus not a reciprocal relationship. Likewise, there are a few important distinctions in terms of the object of the examination. The Christian ascetics placed a much stronger emphasis upon the guilt associated with specific sins and the practice of repentance. This was not a momentary repentance for each individual sin, but rather the manifestation of an entire mode of life constituted by perpetual repentance with the accompanying attitude of compunction. Nevertheless, there is a vital connection, insofar as in both the ascetic and philosophical communities, the practice of self-examination served as a means of preparing for and reinforcing the exercise of vigilant attention to the present moment. It is to this, the crowning practice of the system of spiritual exercises according to Hadot, that we now turn our attention.

Vigilance

Throughout our studies of meditation on striking sayings, the remembrance of death, and the examination of conscience, the practice of vigilance (*prosochē, nēpsis*, attention to the present moment) has been steadily in the background. We have observed that it is necessarily connected to these other exercises, that it entails them and they entail it. As Hadot puts it, “Attention to the present moment is, in a sense, the key to spiritual exercises,” and he reiterates

¹⁸⁴ Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 59.9.

again and again the necessary connection between the other exercises and this crowning practice.¹⁸⁵ Without a constant, rigorous attention to the moment, the other spiritual exercises, both in their philosophical and monastic instantiations, would simply be floating practices, not part of a total system of living. This is because vigilance is not just one more exercise among a set, but rather the summit to which the others lead. “Attention to one’s self”, says Hadot, “was the fundamental attitude of the Stoics, and of the Neoplatonists as well.”¹⁸⁶ Again, “As for the Stoics, the fundamental Epicurean spiritual exercise consists in concentration on the present – that is to say, on the consciousness of the ‘I’ in the present – and in refraining from projecting our desires on the future.”¹⁸⁷ Across the board, then, vigilance is the central practice.

To see the connection between vigilance and the other exercises, let us begin by taking the three exercises we have studied thus far in order. Meditation is necessary for vigilance because it allows the philosopher to have his principles readily available in any circumstance. By memorizing clear, forceful epitomes of the key tenets of a philosophy, it becomes possible to recall and act upon them, even under stress. The contemplation of death, meanwhile, focuses the mind upon the infinite value of each moment. For the Epicurean and Stoic schools, which did not believe in an immortal soul, remembering death forces one to value life as a limited commodity; one must either act now or not at all. In the context of a doctrine of an immortal soul, meanwhile, such as Christianity teaches, the actions of the present moment have everlasting

¹⁸⁵ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 84. Hadot repeatedly points out the extent to which vigilance is necessarily connected to the other exercises. Cf.: “Attention to the self and vigilance also presuppose exercises of thought: we must meditate, remember, and have constantly ‘at hand’ our principles of action, which will be summarized, as far as possible, in short sayings.” *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 244. (Rönnegård, “*Melētē* in Early Christian Ascetic Texts”, 90 makes a similar point.) “Linked to the meditation upon death, the theme of the value of the present instant plays a fundamental role in all the philosophical schools.” Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 69. “Vigilance and self-attention clearly presuppose the practice of examining one’s conscience.” Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 134.

¹⁸⁶ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 242.

¹⁸⁷ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 195-6.

consequences. Finally, through the regular examination of conscience, the philosopher learns over time to apply concretely the ethical standards to which he subscribes abstractly. Every action comes to be evaluated for the extent to which it conforms to or deviates from the teachings of the school. As with meditation, the regular practice of this exercise inculcates a constant awareness of the rule of life the philosopher has adopted. Thus we find that, across the different philosophies (and in the *Apophthegmata* as well), the various spiritual exercises do not simply form an undifferentiated group of practices that can be taken up or omitted as one wills. Rather, there is a coherent program of exercises designed in a definite way to lead the philosopher to a concentration upon the present moment.

The identification of concentration on the moment as the capstone of the spiritual exercises raises as many questions as it answers. It remains to be seen what exactly this attention meant in its various contexts. At its most basic level, attention to the present simply means not being diverted in one's mind to thinking about the past or the future, but attending to current circumstances and approaching them in the light of philosophical commitments. For the different schools, however, this could have widely varying – indeed, quite opposite – implications. In Epicurean philosophy, attention to the present takes the form of the enjoyment of the pleasures of the present instant. This begins with the simple joy of being, the pure happiness felt by virtue of the fact that one exists. As Philodemus says, “Worthily receiving each addition of time, as if having chanced upon a great piece of good luck, be thankful also according to this in these matters.”¹⁸⁸ The Epicurean has no expectation of immortality, and a studied disregard for death. In each moment, his joy simply at existing is renewed. Further, it is in the present moment (and there alone) that one may experience the simple, moderate pleasures

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Gigante, *Ricerche Filodomee*, 181.

in which Epicurus teaches his followers to ground their lives – simple food, bodily security, and philosophical conversation among friends.¹⁸⁹

As with everything in Epicurean philosophy, there is also a therapeutic element to the concentration on the present. Humans suffer great mental anguish through their regrets over the past (the reader will recall self-examination as part of the treatment here) and worries about the future. Reporting on Epicurus' thought, Diogenes Laertius observes the way in which the suffering of the mind can be worse than that of the body: "The flesh, indeed, only endures the storms of the present, but the soul endures the past, the present, and the future."¹⁹⁰ By putting aside the past and future, concentrating instead only on the moment, Epicurus and his followers sought to do away with the mental pain of worry and regret. Horace, influenced by Epicureanism, writes, "The soul happy in the present should hate worrying about what lies ahead."¹⁹¹ In the words of Epicurus himself, "We have been born once, and twice is not possible; for eternity we must exist no longer. But you who are not master of tomorrow put off joy. Life is wasted with procrastination, and each one of us dies full of busy-ness."¹⁹² Concentration on the present for the Epicureans served to reduce mental suffering and intensify the pleasures of existence in the moment.

For the Stoics, the term "vigilance" applies more strictly than it does with the Epicureans, with their tendency towards relaxation, given the sense of moral tension in Stoic thought and practice. In Nussbaum's words, "The Stoic idea of learning is an idea of increasing vigilance and wakefulness, as the mind, increasingly rapid and active, learns to repossess its own

¹⁸⁹ See Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 196: "The present is enough for happiness, because it allows us to satisfy our simplest and most necessary desires, which provide stable pleasure."

¹⁹⁰ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, X.137. Epicurus is also reported as asserting that the pleasures of the mind are greater than the pleasures of the body, on the same grounds.

¹⁹¹ Horace, *Odes* 2.16.25.

¹⁹² Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings*, 14.

experiences from the fog of habit, convention, and forgetfulness.”¹⁹³ The Stoic understanding of “the present” as not just the point dividing the past from the future, but as something having more depth – as the whole of the activity upon which one is engaged – is critical.¹⁹⁴ To grasp the importance of the present for Stoic thought, we must recall the distinction, basic to all of Stoicism, between that which is “up to us”, that is, under our control, and that which is not. The past is already set, in the Stoic view, and the future is beyond our reach. Only in the present do we find anything in our own power, only there does moral freedom exist. As a consequence, since there is no value save for moral value, nothing is of any worth except the present, the present *qua* locus of freedom. “Only the present is within our power,” Hadot explains, “simply because the only thing that we live is the present moment. Becoming aware of the present means becoming aware of our freedom.”¹⁹⁵ For this reason Aurelius exhorts himself to “remember that each person lives only this present, this brief moment; all else has either already been lived or is in an uncertain future.”¹⁹⁶ This does not mean never thinking about the past or the future, of course. It is necessary to reflect on lessons learned and to plan wisely for the good of all. Rather, the object is to free oneself from passionate attachment to either the past or the future.¹⁹⁷ In this way, one gives full assent to the moment as it is received from the hand of universal reason and one remains in control of moral freedom, not acting at random, but by the exercise of

¹⁹³ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 340.

¹⁹⁴ Hadot goes into more detail on this point at Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, 135-6 and Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 192.

¹⁹⁵ Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, 132.

¹⁹⁶ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, III.10. At the end of this passage, he connects this reflection with the idea of death, recalling the shortness of life and how paltry even the greatest posthumous fame is. Again, at XII.26, he reiterates “each person lives only this present, and this is what each loses.”

¹⁹⁷ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 192.

deliberate will.¹⁹⁸ This includes not just watching one's actions, but also mental representations of the world.¹⁹⁹

In addition to securing moral freedom, there is also a broader dimension to Stoic concentration on the present constituted by the practitioner's relationship to the divine and the entire universe. The Stoic is not supposed to simply be aware of the present, but to *consent* to it. All things are given by that reason which governs the world, and it is all (taking the objective view) for the best. In each moment, then, the Stoic renews his agreement with all that is. As Hadot puts it, "Attentive people live in the constant presence of the universal Reason which is immanent within the cosmos. They see all things from the perspective of this Reason, and consent joyfully to its will."²⁰⁰ This brings with it constant attention to God, to which Aurelius refers when he says, "Rejoice and find rest in one thing: to move from social act to social act, with the remembrance of God."²⁰¹ This constant remembrance of God also appears in later Platonism, little surprise given the extent to which Neoplatonism incorporated a variety of aspects of Stoicism into its synthesis. Having realized that his true life is that of intellect, the Neoplatonist must be like someone blocking out other sounds in order to hear the voice that is the best of all sounds: "Thus it is necessary to let go sensible sounds, except insofar as is necessary, and to keep the soul's power of apprehension pure and prepared to hear voices from above."²⁰² Thus oriented to his true life, that life which is in relationship with the One through

¹⁹⁸ In this way there is also therapeutic value to the concentration on the present, as evils can become more bearable when seen only as a series of moments. See Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, 132.

¹⁹⁹ Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 327.

²⁰⁰ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 138.

²⁰¹ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* VI.7. Foucault misunderstands this as "pleasure that one takes in oneself" (Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 66), which is not proper to a Stoic context. Stoic joy does not consist in pleasure of this sort, but in joy at fulfilling one's assigned role within a universal governed by perfect reason. It is this sort of misunderstanding that leads Foucault into his excessive emphasis upon aesthetics, to the detriment of that which is properly philosophical.

²⁰² Plotinus, *Enneads* V.1.12.

intellect, Porphyry's words may be put into practice: "As overseer and guardian of every action and of every deed and word, let God be present."²⁰³ The presence of the highest principle is part of the practice of constant awareness, renewed in each moment.

We see, then, the concentration on the present, with (for those philosophies that have a God) its attendant remembrance of God, present across the board. Further, we have seen that it is not just one exercise among many, but rather the fundamental attitude of all ancient philosophy, considered as a way of life. By practicing this attention to the present, the philosopher actualizes his commitment in each moment, putting his philosophy into practice. Without attention to the moment, distraction and slackness set in, and the philosopher becomes an ordinary man of the world. While the different philosophies take radically different approaches to this concentration, from Epicurus' relaxation to the vigilant tension of the Stoa, the present moment is given the highest value by all.

This basic commitment translates quite naturally to the monastic context, as Hadot was quick to notice: "*Prosoche* or attention to oneself, the philosopher's fundamental attitude, became the fundamental attitude of the monk."²⁰⁴ From the *prosochē* of the philosopher, we turn now to the *nēpsis* of the monk. Derived from the verb *nēphō*, with the base meaning of being sober as opposed to drunk, *nēpsis* comes, particularly in monastic discourse, to have a much broader sense of alertness, vigilance, total and constant awareness. Again, the *Philokalia* translators, drawing on the broader Christian ascetic tradition, are helpful, defining *nēpsis* as "literally, the opposite of a state of drunken stupor; hence spiritual sobriety, alertness, vigilance. It signifies an attitude of attentiveness (*προσοχή* – *prosochi*), whereby one keeps watch over

²⁰³ Porphyry, *Letter to Marcella*, 12.

²⁰⁴ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 131.

one's inward thoughts and fancies, maintaining guard over the heart and intellect."²⁰⁵ Again we see the equation of *prosochē* and *nēpsis*, and the basic compatibility of the two attitudes. As in the case of the Stoics, the concept is best aligned with an English term such as "vigilance" or "watchfulness". Certainly here there is none of the Epicurean relaxation in the moment. Rather, the Desert Fathers are exhorting their disciples to a spiritual tension, guarding each moment with jealous attention.

In the *Apophthegmata*, we often hear about the importance of remaining vigilant. Of Abba Agathon, it is said that "he had great vigilance in all things, and he would say, 'Without vigilance, a person does not advance, not even in one virtue.'"²⁰⁶ John Colobos was so vigilant in his attention to God, that he could easily forget mundane tasks, and needed to be reminded several times.²⁰⁷ An anonymous elder was direct in his exhortation, saying, "Let us be watchful, brothers, let us be vigilant in prayers, let us devote ourselves to God in order that we be saved."²⁰⁸ Similarly, there are stern warnings about the fate of those who fail to practice this critical virtue. An elder condemns "this generation" for its lack of attention to the present, because it "does not seek today, but tomorrow."²⁰⁹ We shall see in more detail below what becomes of those who are insufficiently vigilant, how they fall prey to the demons and the passions. These sayings provide just a small sampling of the repeated call to watch and take care that resonates throughout the *Sayings* tradition. In the Systematic Collection, the entire eleventh chapter is devoted to the necessity of remaining constantly watchful. With 127 sayings, it is one

²⁰⁵ Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware, *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, vol. 1, 367. It is interesting to note that the full Greek title of the *Philokalia* is actually "The Philokalia of the Nēptic Fathers", indicating the centrality of this virtue to the ascetic tradition. Ibid, 367-8.

²⁰⁶ Systematic Collection XI.9-10.

²⁰⁷ Systematic Collection XI.39. XI.38 also tells a story of Colobos' inattention to earthly tasks due to his great spiritual vigilance.

²⁰⁸ Systematic Collection XI.112.

²⁰⁹ Systematic Collection XXI.31.

of the longer chapters, exceeding (in terms of number of sayings) the chapters on uninterrupted prayer, hospitality, and obedience combined, and by a significant margin. The repeated exhortations to vigilance, the warnings about it, and the length of the chapter devoted to it all indicate that this practice was not merely present among the Desert Fathers, but was highly prized as one of the most important virtues. This impression is confirmed by the existence of a system of spiritual exercises, described above, that act in service of this *nēpsis*.

From here we turn to the question of how *nēpsis* was practiced in the Desert. As Abba Silvanus indicates, it was an attitude that had to be constantly renewed. In response to Abba Moses' question "can a person make a new beginning each day?", Silvanus teaches that "if a person is a worker, he can make a new start each day and each hour."²¹⁰ One must never relax, confident that one has *nēpsis* as a stable possession; rather it is a matter of exertion in every instant. Two elements in particular, familiar from the above discussion of Stoicism, and to some extent Platonism, characterize monastic *nēpsis*, although modified in certain ways from philosophic practice. The first of these is the constant remembrance of God, the second, attention to moral and spiritual obligations.

While the God in question is quite different in a Christian monastic context, the vocabulary of remembering him at every moment is hardly new. With the words of Marcus Aurelius in mind, the words of one elder, citing Basil of Caesarea, have a familiar ring, although more biblical in tone:

‘Attend to yourself in order to attend to God.’²¹¹ For if we do not attend also to God, we go astray in trackless lands, but if we always pay attention, we sing to him endless hymns of thanksgiving for the indescribable wonders of God which have happened for us, so that we might also gain eternal goods.²¹²

²¹⁰ Systematic Collection XI.69.

²¹¹ Although it appears at the end of a string of citations from Scripture, this appears to be a quotation from Basil of Caesarea, Homily on “*Attende tibi ipsi*”, PG 31:197C-217B.

²¹² Systematic Collection XI.51.

Likewise, John Colobos advises “sitting in the cell and remembering God with vigilance,”²¹³ and Abba Alonas takes the principle further, enjoining the monk to forget everything except for God: “If a person does not say in his heart, ‘I alone and God are in the world,’ he will not have repose.”²¹⁴ In an unattributed saying belonging to Isaiah of Scetis, the monk is warned of those things that “drive the remembrance of God from the soul: wrath, contempt, wishing to teach, and the idle talk of this world.”²¹⁵ Of course a monk’s remembrance of God is different from a Stoic’s (or a Platonist’s, although the resemblance is perhaps a little closer in that case). The Stoic is not in any sort of personal relationship of love with God as the monk is supposed to be and is not likely to catch fire in spiritual ecstasies as the notoriously-flammable monks of the Egyptian Desert were known to do. However, the basic principle of retaining a memory of the constant presence and governance of God is held in common across contexts. Recalling at all moments the ultimate first principle of one’s philosophy or religion is a vital element in keeping the rule of life steadily before the eyes.

Discussions of *nēpsis* in the *Apophthegmata* are likewise replete with references to the monk’s moral and spiritual obligations. The major concern is the way in which any sort of distraction might open the door to the passions or the demons (the two are intimately related in monastic discourse, and often essentially interchangeable, particularly in Evagrius). One of the first sayings in the chapter on *porneia*, a subject of perpetual concern to ascetics, encourages every monk, in the words of Proverbs, to “watch his own heart with all vigilance.”²¹⁶ Abba Poemen reinforces the lesson about vigilance as the guard against the passions, teaching, “If we

²¹³ Systematic Collection XI.43.

²¹⁴ Systematic Collection XI.13.

²¹⁵ Systematic Collection XI.20.

²¹⁶ Systematic Collection V.2, Proverbs 4:23.

persist in our practice and are carefully vigilant, we will not find in ourselves any defilement.”²¹⁷

Meanwhile it is because “our mind departs from the contemplation of God” that “we are taken captive by the carnal passions,” according to Theonas,²¹⁸ and an anonymous elder teaches that “Satan cannot do anything to us if our soul is near to God ... but since we are continually distracted, the enemy easily carries off our wretched soul to disgraceful passions.”²¹⁹ This concern obviously pertains to acts of sin, but for the monks that is always the second step in the process. Primary was keeping a close watch on the *logismoi* that always threatened to lead the monk into distraction, sin, and ultimately spiritual destruction. “If our inner person is not vigilant, it is not possible to guard the outer person too,”²²⁰ we hear from an elder, with the implication that watchfulness over actions is meaningless without inner watchfulness. While this sort of guard on the mind certainly has precedent in philosophy, it clearly reaches a much higher degree of emphasis and sophistication within the ascetic tradition, facilitated by the hours the monks spent alone with their thoughts in the cell, along with the constant examination and attendant confession.

The heightened importance of guarding the thoughts, and the particular framework within which the monks evaluated these thoughts, represents a distinct emphasis, but one that remains in basic continuity with the philosophical background. A more important difference can be identified in the critical role played by continuous prayer within the ascetic tradition, a practice with substantial biblical support,²²¹ but little to nothing in the way of philosophical precursors. The *Apophthegmata* mentions vigilance and prayer as paired practices on a number of

²¹⁷ Systematic Collection XI.57.

²¹⁸ Systematic Collection XI.36.

²¹⁹ Systematic Collection XI.95.

²²⁰ Systematic Collection XI.103.

²²¹ Most importantly Paul’s injunction to “pray without ceasing”, I Thessalonians 5:17.

occasions.²²² Similarly, *hēsychia*, also a uniquely monastic practice and one that is closely connected to unceasing prayer, is linked to vigilance, as we have seen. Prayer can be understood as a spiritual exercise, but it is one that develops out of a particularly Christian context. It is only later forms of Platonism that develop anything like this sort of mystical tradition, and even there the practice lacks the centrality that contemplative prayer has for the Desert Fathers. Closely linking prayer to vigilance, then, must be regarded as part of the Christianization of the philosophical exercises.

Modified as it was to fit the particular needs of the monastic community, *nēpsis* sits at the summit of ascetical exercises, just as *prosochē* did for the philosophers. In both contexts, the other exercises operate in a coherent manner to pave the way for practicing vigilance, and vigilance turns out to be necessary for the other exercises (and, indeed, the whole philosophical life²²³). We find, then, that it is not simply a question of Christian monks developing by happenstance a few practices with a superficial similarity to Greek philosophical approaches, or of one or two practices being adopted piecemeal. Rather, a total system of attention to the self, culminating in the achievement of an attitude of careful attention to the moment, following through on a *kanōn* at each instant, has emerged. Therefore, we propose an organic connection, in which the monastic teachers drew upon and developed for their own purposes spiritual exercises grounded in centuries of philosophical practice.

Conclusion: Differentiation and Continuity

At this point we have surveyed four key exercises as they appeared in a variety of philosophical schools (primarily the Stoic, Epicurean, and Platonist) and, in more detail, the

²²² Cf. Systematic Collection XII.4, XI.87.

²²³ Christian authors often referred to monasticism as “philosophy” or “the philosophical life”.

transformations they underwent in order to be of use to the Egyptian hermits depicted in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. A number of the differences that appear can be traced to the genre of the *Apophthegmata*. To begin, several of the spiritual exercises present in ancient philosophy do not make any appearance in the Sayings tradition. A number of philosophical schools utilized the study of physics (in its ancient philosophical sense) as a spiritual exercise. By contemplating the structure of the world, one could orient oneself within it and better understand one's role.²²⁴ The Epicureans, for example, wanted their disciples to think about the fact that the gods do not interact with the world in any way in order to dispel fear of them. Detailed discussions of physics, however, would not be appropriate to the sort of literature constituted by the *Apophthegmata*. Similarly, dialogue (we recall again Goldschmidt's dictum about Socratic dialogue being more to "form" than to "inform")²²⁵ does not fit the literary model. Both of these practices appear elsewhere in Christian literature, naturally enough, but not here. Evagrius Ponticus recommends practices that look a great deal like physics as a spiritual exercise,²²⁶ and there is a long history of Christian dialogues in the Socratic/Platonic tradition. Gregory of Nyssa's *On the Soul and the Resurrection* provides one example, one particularly fitting given the clearly therapeutic nature of the text (Macrina is working to sooth her brother's excessive grief). There is nothing about Christianity or monasticism in themselves that prevent these exercises from being undertaken; they simply require different literary forms than we find in the Sayings.

²²⁴ Cf. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 87-8, 97-9.

²²⁵ Goldschmidt, *Les Dialogues de Platon*, 3

²²⁶ Cf. Evagrius, *Praktikos* 1, in which one of the component parts of Christianity is "*physikē*" and Ibid, 2, where "the Kingdom of Heaven" is identified with "true knowledge of beings". Cf. Luke Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 40-44 on natural contemplation in Evagrius. Evagrius taught that the ascetic should contemplate other rational minds and the *logoi* of created things as part of the return of the *nous* to God.

Other differences in the practice of spiritual exercises derive from distinctive aspects of the Christian and monastic traditions. As noted above, Christianity's status as a textual, revealed religion meant that texts for meditation could not only be taken from the famed forebears of the community, but could also come from scripture. Similarly, the belief in a final judgment and an eternal soul led to quite distinctive developments in the exercise of the contemplation of death. The nature of monastic pedagogy, with its emphasis on confession to a trusted elder, along with the Christian emphasis on sin and repentance, lead to the unique characteristics of monastic self-examination, and Christianity's belief in a personal God combined with the long hours of silent reflection in the cell to define the unique boundaries of *nēpsis* in the ascetic tradition.

In considering the unique Christian-monastic developments of spiritual exercises, we may also take into account two practices that become part of the field of spiritual exercises with little precedent in pagan philosophy. Physical asceticism – fasting, celibacy, night vigils, and the rest – takes on a truly central role in monastic spiritual practice, as opposed to its more marginal position in philosophical contexts. It is important in this connection to emphasize the fact that practices like fasting did not exist simply as matters of ritual or purity, or even of penance (which did of course play some role as well). In fact, they were seen as ways to control and modify the operations of the soul. Thus one elder says that “I remove the pleasures in order that I might cut out occasions for anger. For I know the one who is always fighting me through the pleasures, disturbing my mind and chasing off my understanding.”²²⁷ Again, we learn from John Colobos, “If a king wishes to take possession of an enemy city, he first gains control of the water and the food, and thus the enemy submits to him, destroyed by hunger. Thus also the passions of the

²²⁷ Systematic Collection IV.14. An Evagrian saying passed along anonymously, according to Guy, *Les apophtegmes des pères: Collection systématique*, vol. 1, 191, n. 1.

flesh: if a person lives in fasting and hunger, the enemies lose their power from his soul.”²²⁸ Such

references could be multiplied. Fasting was a means by which the monks worked upon their souls and sought to transform their relationship with the world. By practices of physical asceticism, the monks felt they could clear their minds and weaken the passions and bodily attachments. On this view, and especially taking into account the deliberate and systematic methods by which fasting was practiced, fasting (or at least the strong emphasis upon it) can be seen as a monastic contribution to the spiritual exercises.

The same may be said of the practice of prayer. Apart perhaps from certain late theurgic approaches, there is nothing in ancient philosophy that is comparable to monastic practices of continuous prayer. While there is a connection between *nēpsis* and prayer, the two are not identical (any more than contemplation of death or examination of conscience are identical to *nēpsis*). As noted above, Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, writing about fifth/sixth century Gaza (the context in which the *Apophthegmata* were assembled in their final form), make a compelling argument for the inclusion of prayer among the spiritual exercises.²²⁹ Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky build on Hadot’s work, but note that “he emphasized in particular their similarities, somewhat muting the distinctions between them; hence in his study the peculiarities of monastic spiritual exercises were to some extent passed over.”²³⁰ For the Sayings tradition, prayer was not just a matter of ritually praising or thanking God or asking for favors (although those aspects were included). Through the effects wrought on the soul by the practice of continuous,

²²⁸ Systematic Collection IV.20.

²²⁹ Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, *The Monastic School of Gaza*, 157. Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky provide at this point a catalogue of Gazan spiritual exercises: “several spiritual exercises were listed by the teachers in Gaza to mould their disciples and guide them to self-transformation: attention to oneself (προσοχή) and vigilance at every moment, watching the heart (νήψισ), examining conscience (συνείδησις), meditation (μελέτη), self-mastery (ἐγκράτεια), a complete elimination of passions (ἀπάθεια), and humility (ταπείνωσις).” Their entire chapter on prayer as a spiritual exercise (157-82) is most useful, and I am deeply indebted to it.

²³⁰ Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, *The Monastic School of Gaza*, 159.

meditative prayer as well as the close communion with God that it was intended to effect, the monk sought to bring about transformations in his soul. “Continually praying swiftly brings the mind to a proper state.”²³¹ Prayer in this sense, as a spiritual exercise, represents (like fasting) a real monastic innovation in the realm of spiritual exercises. Taking both of these cases together, it is plain that while the monks were glad to make use of those philosophical practices that might suit their needs, they were also quite able to develop elements within the biblical and patristic heritage and fashion them into monastic spiritual exercises.

These discontinuities – philosophical exercises not taken up, uniquely monastic ones invented – must be taken together with the substantial continuities detailed above in order to form a complete picture of the spiritual exercises in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. The picture turns out to be a complex one. It is not simply a matter of Christian exercises invented out of whole cloth, nor is it a matter of philosophical exercises accepted uncritically. Rather, some are dropped, some newly invented, and some are taken up; among this third class, there are notable modifications in every case. These modifications are in continuity with the way the exercises spread from school to school within the realm of ancient philosophy. Each exercise would be reworked and given a different focus as it moved from Platonism to Stoicism to Epicureanism and beyond. There is enough continuity, however, to speak of the same system being present across the philosophical schools. Likewise, the *Apophthegmata* depicts the adoption of the system of exercises. The same exercises appear in ancient philosophy and in Christianity on not one or two occasions, but on four. They are not just one or two instances of borrowing or similarity, but represent a cohesive program for spiritual transformation, using ancient philosophy.

²³¹ Systematic Collection XII.15.

Recalling the discussion in the introduction to this dissertation, the word “use” is vital here, as it recalls us to the basics of the relationship of Christianity and ancient philosophy. What we have found clearly shows the value of the “use” model for evaluating that relationship. There is no question of the monks being totally dependent upon their philosophical precedents, and it does not seem to be a matter of any basically unmonastic or unchristian ideals entering under the influence of philosophy. Rather, within a Christian context, asceticism has a particular role to play. The monks found that, in order to fulfill that mission, spiritual practices derived from ancient philosophy would be of use, just as theologians would find arguments and doctrines from philosophy useful. These practices are at each point subordinated to the perspective of monasticism, and in particular to the unique doctrinal commitments of Late Antique Christianity. This lead to a number of modifications that reflect the extent to which the paradigm of the use of ancient philosophy by early Christianity applies appropriately to this area of practice, as it does to theology.

Looking beyond the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, there is no reason why this project could not be continued and expanded to the point of taking into account a larger corpus of early Christian ascetic literature. As noted above, Evagrius Ponticus seems a fruitful source in which the idea of physics as a spiritual exercise, and indeed much more, might be found.²³² Hadot favored Dorotheus of Gaza as a source for spiritual exercises in monasticism, Foucault found evidence in Cassian, and others have looked elsewhere. Exercises not attested in the *Apophthegmata* might well appear in other sources, and there will doubtless be subtle variations according to context. Filling out this picture will provide us not only with a better pictures of

²³² An initial effort in this direction may be found in Tsakiridis, *Evagrius Ponticus and Cognitive Science*, 50-5. Hewing very closely to Hadot’s work, Tsakiridis concludes that “It is clear that in Evagrius’ writings both form and content have roots in ancient philosophy.”

early monastic practice, but should also expand our understanding of the relationship of Christianity and philosophy. Tracing the presence and development of philosophical exercises in early Christianity will help to demonstrate that the relationship between these two movements extended well beyond the intellectual realm, finding expression in spiritual practice as well.

CONCLUSION

We have now journeyed from the beginning of the philosophical life, marked by the decision to convert to a new, elite, disciplined spiritual path, through the process of formation by which the convert learns how to think and to live in a philosophical manner, and then climbs the ladder of spiritual exercises. Through the practices of contemplation of death, meditation, examination of conscience, and more, a state of perpetual vigilance is cultivated, allowing the requirements of the philosophical life to be recalled and observed at each and every moment. At this summit, we can properly speak of philosophy being lived in its fullness. From this vantage point it is appropriate to take up again some of the theoretical considerations that have guided this dissertation. A few key principles about the nature of ancient philosophy, the monastic life, and the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem have served as the underpinning for the arguments herein.

Perhaps the most important of these principles, and certainly the most foundational, has been the observation made by Pierre Hadot and developed by a variety of other scholars, that ancient philosophy was not merely an intellectual movement notable for its distinctive logic, argumentation, and dogmatic positions. Rather, it involved a comprehensive way of life aimed at governing everything from the philosopher's intellect, to personal and social interactions, and to private thoughts, fears, and concerns. Without this observation, and the attendant transformation of scholarship on ancient philosophy that has followed from it, this dissertation simply would not have been possible. The project has been based on analyzing three areas of philosophical life that take us beyond the realm of doctrine and discourse and into the domain of practice. Naturally such an undertaking must include the most distinctive element of Hadot's portrait of ancient philosophy, the spiritual exercises. The exercises do not emerge in a vacuum,

of course, but are taught within the philosophical schools. The teaching relationship, central to learning how to live a properly philosophical life, is the necessary underpinning for these exercises. Philosophical pedagogy likewise cannot be understood apart from its role as the entry point into a community, and so it proved essential to first examine how the entrance of new members into the community was managed. This process of conversion (and selection of prospective converts) forms the true beginning of the philosophical life. By examining these three areas of philosophical life, all of which are distinguishable from doctrinal issues and replete with parallels across the major schools, this dissertation aims to serve, in the first instance, as a development and deepening of the scholarly understanding of philosophy as a way of life.

Of course, the subject here is not merely the philosophical life, but the inheritance of that life in the early Christian monastic movement, especially as expressed by the Systematic Collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Like ancient philosophy, monasticism is a totalizing way of life, beginning in a conversion experience, shaped by a teaching relationship, and characterized at its apex by spiritual exercises. Following up on these three areas of inquiry, I have demonstrated that in each case, the community that produced the *Apophthegmata* was building upon philosophical foundations in order to develop a vision of the monastic life. This community did not slavishly reproduce philosophical precedents, nor did this engagement divert the Desert Fathers from their distinctively Christian and monastic goals. Instead, they creatively transformed philosophical approaches in accordance with the unique commitments and opportunities involved in monastic life.

Let us consider three examples, one from each chapter. First, in the context of conversion, it became clear that setting out on the philosophical life entailed a certain degree of calculated withdrawal. This was variously inflected in the different schools, but could include

distancing oneself from the political, social, and religious expectations of society. The brand of monastic life depicted in the *Apophthegmata* brought with it an opportunity to make this withdrawal both more radical and more concrete. While many early Christian monks remained quite close to lay communities, and even those of Scetis, Nitria, and Kellia were far from being totally cut off, the latter locations were located at some distance from the Nile Valley in the low desert, creating a degree of physical withdrawal to accompany the metaphorical sense.¹ In the matter of the teaching relationship, the personal intimacy of abba and disciple had the potential to reach a depth not seen in ancient philosophy. Monastic teachers and their charges were more likely to share living spaces than their philosophical forebears, and the demands of monastic confession exceed most of the philosophical evidence. Here we see the same practices intensified through the unique living situations made possible by monastic communities. Finally, the contemplation of death demonstrates this sort of creative transformation particularly clearly. While the monks agreed with the philosophers that regular reflection on the limitations of the present life was a salutary spiritual practice, their Christian commitment to the resurrection of the dead and eternal life reoriented the exercise. Instead of cultivating a sense of the mortality of the soul, as in Stoicism or Epicureanism, or a sense of the need to transcend the limitations of the body, as in Platonism, monastic contemplation of death meant preparation for the final judgment before the throne of God.

These three cases illustrate especially well a principle that underlies the entirety of this study, one laid out in the introductory discussion of the relationship of Christianity and philosophy. At that stage, we saw that, in studies of the ways in which the formation of

¹ The sharp, visible division between the red land and the black land provided even monks who withdrew shorter distances a concrete geographical line to step across.

Christian doctrine employs philosophical tools, the concept of the Christian “use” of philosophy best explained the phenomena. We see now that the same is true on the practical level.

Monasticism is not deformed or controlled by the philosophical sources it employs in developing its practices any more than theology is by the terms, concepts, and arguments it makes use of. Instead, the opportunities offered by the unique shape of monastic community allowed the monks to modify the inherited philosophical approaches. Likewise, the particulars of Christian theology to which the monks were committed lead them to reinterpret the practices they were employing and fit them to new purposes. Thus the “use” model for the Christian relationship with philosophy turns out to apply not only to questions of doctrine and theology, but also to eminently practical concerns about communal and spiritual life.

If the conclusions of the present work, limited as they are by the scope of the project, are accepted, then it follows naturally that we should consider what other areas could be profitably explored by employing the same framework. As noted in the chapter on spiritual exercises, it makes sense to pose these same questions of other monastic and ascetic authors. Evagrius Ponticus would be one obvious source to seek further information on the spiritual exercises, and there are many others. We could likewise search other monastic literature for information on conversion and pedagogy. These theoretical conclusions also point to other fields of inquiry. As noted briefly in the discussion of meditation, Lillian Larsen has led the way in studying the literary form of the Sayings and its classical precedents. The formal elements of the literary production of monastic communities would be a natural next step in studies of monastic appropriations of philosophy. Community structures seem like another promising avenue for exploration. Here we have concentrated on the teacher/student relationship as the entry point into the community, but there is more to the equation than this. Study of the relationships

between students or between established leaders, or perhaps of the economic structures of monastic and philosophical communities, might also bear fruit when approached within a similar framework. Finally, these questions of the Christian appropriation of philosophical practice need not be confined to the monastic sphere. The lives of philosophically educated bishops may have important parallels. Homiletic material might indicate ways in which Christian preachers sought to inculcate these practices in their congregations. Whatever texts, figures, and areas we choose to explore, one thing is clear: studies of Christianity and philosophy need to take more serious account of questions of practice alongside questions of doctrine.

In the last analysis, we have seen that the monks are, in a meaningful sense, the inheritors of the philosophical tradition as the Late Antique world gave way to the Middle Ages and beyond. This is clear enough on the intellectual level, as a large portion of medieval philosophical production came from vowed members of ascetic communities. This is true whether we are thinking of a Maximus the Confessor or a Gregory Palamas in the East or an Anselm or an Aquinas in the West. It is not only in terms of this intellectual tradition in which monks are the successors to the philosophers, however. Just as importantly, if not more so, the monks inherited the philosophical way of life. Philosophical traditions of spiritual formation, spiritual exercises, and spiritual guidance all found a home and a long, rich afterlife within the walls of the monasteries and the cells of the hermits. What the wise man had been in the ancient world, the holy man became in the Church. By studying this transition at an important source, the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, we can see in their infancy the principles and methods that have guided monastic practice, and, through monasticism's enormous influence, clerical and lay practice as well for the last millennium and a half.

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