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PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY AND SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Abstract. The resurgence of practical philosophy can be seen as a contemporary attempt to bridge the apparent gap between philosophy and spirituality. Philosophy, in its search for wisdom, misses its primary goal since the theoretical solutions do not lead to the transformation of philosophers' lives. This article offers a view of the resurgence of practical philosophy in the first chapter and, in the second, the connection of practical philosophy with spiritual exercises, presented in Pierre Hadot's writing. The underlying assumption, in both practical philosophy and in Pierre Hadot's reflection, is a desire of the philosopher to engage in something life-transforming. The authenticity of the transformation depends on one's willingness to transcend their initial subjective position. The third chapter refers to Socrates as the eminent teacher of dialogue, presented as a spiritual and intellectual journey of transformation. Socrates' dialogical method remains the inspiring paradigm, adopted by many scholars of philosophy and spirituality in search of wisdom, which has to be theoretical, practical, and spiritual.

Keywords: dialogue, Pierre Hadot, practical philosophy, spiritual exercises, Socrates, transformation

Introduction

The degree of connection and disconnection between philosophy and spirituality has come to the fore of philosophical interest in recent decades, both in academic circles and in everyday reflections. An overview of the intellectual history of philosophy and spirituality clearly shows that the disconnection between these two sciences regarding man's deepest

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perception of reality is illusory; disconnection is a phenomenon of modernity, starting with the Enlightenment, looking at spirituality as something illogical, sensual, and inferior to scientific knowledge. This phenomenon is losing traction with the steadily growing interest in spirituality in our time, calling for a more adequate understanding of what spirituality is (see Cosgrave 2017, 593-602) and, consequently, what the connection or differentiation between spirituality and philosophy looks like. To answer these questions adequately, one must also review and refresh the understanding of what the goal and mission of spirituality and philosophy is.[2]

These two concepts indicate mysterious dimensions of human existence that narrow definition of philosophy or spirituality insufficiently enlightens. The sophisticated algorithms of artificial intelligence (along with its younger siblings), cannot provide an adequate interpretation of the intriguing connection between philosophy and theology, even while linked with the abundance of knowledge that the age of information offers. Such an interpretation cannot be left to academia as the exclusive domain of well-educated scholars. The question of the connection or disconnection between philosophy and spirituality literally confronts all people, educated or not, who seek answers to life's deepest challenges. The search for these answers necessarily raises the fundamental question of every human: "Who am I?" The answer requires a reflection liberated from narrow anthropological, ethical, and even theological views on one side and, on the other, strengthens the search for something transcending. In addition, theoretical investigations remain insufficient unless they penetrate, shape, and transform the daily life of the individual or the community.

The purpose of this article is to present the search for the practical aspects of theoretical knowledge as an expression of the spiritual desire to transform our lives. This transformation, as well as a serious engagement in spiritual life, should not be a project left to the creativity of the individual in his/her existence in a self-created bubble. A profound spiritual life is an intriguing and challenging path, based on a genuine

[2] For example, Elie M. Adams claims that the mission of Philosophy today is to point out the errors in our cultural mind and to work for a humanistic cultural reformation (see Adams 2000, 349-364).

dialogue of the practitioner with him/herself, other people, and his/her willingness to be open to the transcendent. By following Socrates as a master of dialogue, this reflection aims at one's engagement in the process of dialogue, not confined to a simple exchange of ideas but instead to the transformation of ourselves. The primary source of this reflection is Pierre Hadot, who interpreted ancient philosophy as a way of life.

Application Turn of Western Philosophy

The perception of philosophy as an interesting but abstract knowledge without anything to do with daily practical challenges quickly leads to the conclusion that philosophy is useless. The diametrically opposed position is taken by those who perceive philosophy as a behavior that represents complex theories and literally transforms the philosopher's life in a way that reveals something great, admirable, attractive, virtuous, and maybe even something divine. The answer to the question of whether philosophy is more useless, useful, or something in between, depends on each individual and his/her personal assumptions. Undoubtedly, the search for the place of the applicability of philosophy in our age of information comes to the fore more prominently in academic circles and among ordinary people. The resurgence of practical philosophy is a recent phenomenon of the past few decades, most probably a response to dissatisfaction with the traditional teaching of academic philosophy that was not connected with people's daily lives.

In the past, general education and professional education were rooted in philosophical principles, insights, tradition, and cultural values. Ancient Greeks, in their search for wisdom, considered philosophy as the highest science. Even when Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD) called philosophy the "handmaid of theology,"[3] philosophy did not lose its prime position among scholars. Philosophers always found their place in the vicinity of kings, who were willing to listen to their philosophical counselors. Formerly indispensable philosophical knowledge seems to

[3] Clement of Alexandria, in his book *The Stromata*, Book I, Chapter 5, puts the title "Philosophy, the handmaid of theology".

be pushed aside nowadays as abstract, frivolous, and impractical. In Clark Glymour's words:

> "The awkwardness does not result entirely from social contrivance; it is a real and essential consequence of how well the philosophical tradition has met the demands that philosophical questions impose." (Glymour 1990, 63)

Such philosophical myopia of the last century calls for new visionaries who are to encourage us to think more philosophically, practically, and responsibly, not just expected to give us clear philosophical answers.

Ancient philosophers did not struggle too much to integrate spiritual practices into their philosophical investigation and search for common wisdom. The origins of Christian monasticism are undoubtedly grounded in this pre-Christian thinking mindset. The concept of ancient philosophy as a way of life gradually disappeared from the West when the study of philosophy became the exclusive domain of universities, becoming harder for ordinary people to access. However, the disappearance of spiritual exercises was never complete, states Matthew Sharp in his interpretation of Hadot. Eminent philosophers like Descartes, Montaigne, Rousseau, Kant, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer, still refer to the idea that philosophy should be taken as a way of life.[4]

The rediscovery of the practicality of philosophy began in the 1980s. Let us call this the *application turn of contemporary Western philosophy*. German philosopher Gerd B. Achenbach started the world's first philosophical practice in 1981 to offer philosophical counseling or consultation services to clients who seek a philosophical understanding of their personal and social challenges and who wish to avoid medicalizing their problems. With his Dutch colleague Ad Hoogendijk, Achenbach wanted to develop an alternative approach to psychotherapeutic culture. Achenbach believed that the clients – called the visitors – should be able to face the existential questions posed by their lives with the help of philosophical therapy and counseling. Inspired by Achenbach's approach, Elliot Cohen, the president and co-founder of the *National Philosophical Counseling Association*, writes:

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[4] See Matthew Sharpe. "Pierre Hadot (1922-2010)." *IEP – Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <https://iep.utm.edu/hadot/#SH5a> (last time accessed on March 6, 2024).

> "In contrast [to psychological counseling], philosophical counseling applies training in philosophy (theories and philosophical way of thinking) to human problems of living. They, therefore, tend to view mental processes in terms of epistemic justification, that is, the justification of beliefs or claims to know."[5]

Unlike the practice of clinical psychology, philosophical counseling focuses less on the underlying causes of mental processes; its primary goal is to help clients examine their arguments, clarify important terms, expose and examine underlying concepts, expose conflicts, explore traditional philosophical theories, and initiate projects for the common good.

Lou Marinoff, the President and Executive Director of the *American Society for Philosophy Counseling and Psychotherapy*, in his book, *Philosophical Practice*, describes the philosophical practice as a synonym for philosophical counseling, therapy, and clinical philosophy, which should be reflected not only in theories but in the practitioner's daily life. Marinoff describes the growing interest in philosophical practice as a dynamic phenomenon that is spreading all over the world, as people continuously search for answers to everyday challenges: conflicts in interpersonal relationships, midlife crises, moral dilemmas, and coping with losses. These and similar challenges are indicative of the human condition and of life itself and not necessarily the reflection of emotional traumas of childhood that they carry with them for the rest of their lives. For this reason, the examination of one's personal intentions, volitions, desires, attachments, beliefs, and aspirations is quintessentially a philosophical task (Marinoff 2002, XIX).

The number of articles on philosophical practices, international conferences centered on this topic, and the general interest in using philosophy to find answers to life's questions proves the growing interest in philosophical practices. From the *First International Conference on Philosophical Practice* held in Canada in 1994, organized by Lou Marinoff and Ran Lahav, to the 17th International Conference in 2023 in Romania, the organizers tried to define the nature of philosophical practice in terms of problem-solving, world interpretation, philosophical care of the self, conceptual art, critical thinking, wisdom inspiration, including spiritual exercises.

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[5] See Elliot Cohen "Philosophical Practice." *NCPA,* 2022. Available at <https://npcassoc.org/philosophical-practice/> (last time accessed on March 4, 2024).

Despite the growing interest, questions regarding philosophical practice remain unanswered. What are the goals and roles of philosophical practice? What is the relationship between philosophical practice and psychological counseling? What are the methods and modes of philosophical practice? What are the entry requirements, training methods, value norms, and ethical codes for the philosophical counseling profession in view of potential misuses and abuses? (see Ding & Yu 2022, 4-7).

Following in the same vein, the question remains whether philosophical practices are also spiritual practices. The answer depends on the definitions of philosophy and its mission, as well as spirituality and its purpose.

Spiritual Exercise in Pierre Hadot's Reflection

The history of philosophy contains numerous theories and philosophical concepts elucidating the notion of the ultimate spiritual realm. Plato and Plotinus, in their reflection, talk about transcendent vision, Stoics and Epicureans about spiritual serenity, and Christians about hope and new life in terms of resurrection (cf. Platovnjak & Svetelj 2021). Modern and contemporary philosophers refer to the connection as sublime (Kant), or as sacred (Paul Ricoeur), or creating a moral community based on respect, care, and compassion. Reconnection with nature as something sacred is another way of expressing one's spirituality, becoming more and more present in contemporary philosophical thought.

One of the most eminent contemporary scholars in this field is the French Philosopher Pierre Hadot (1922-2010), who dedicated his academic career to the analysis of ancient philosophy in general, and to the concept of spiritual exercises in particular. When talking about spiritual[6] exercises, Hadot refers to practices intended to modify and transform the subjects who practice them.

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[6] Hadot uses the term *spiritual* as the most appropriate and necessary word, even though it is not so fashionable in the contemporary world. None of the other adjectives: psychic, moral, ethical, intellectual, of thought, of the soul, cover all the aspects that the term spiritual describes (see Hadot 1995, 81).

> "…the goal pursued in these exercises is self-realization and improvement. … Consumed by worries, torn by passions, he [man] does not live a genuine life, nor is he truly himself. All schools agree that man can be delivered from this state. He can accede to genuine life, improve himself, transform himself, and attain a state of perfection. It is precisely for this that spiritual exercises are intended." (Hadot 1995, 102)

A person should not live in conformity with human prejudices and social conventions but in conformity with the nature of a human, which is reason. In his dialogues, Plato taught that through philosophical and spiritual exercises, one separates from what is alien and exterior to one's soul, which includes passions and desires. Consequently, the soul should be able to return to its true nature. Stoics introduced the idea that the quality of one's life depends on focusing on things that depend on us and leaving aside the things that do not depend on us. Similarly, Epicureanism teaches us to ignore unnatural and unnecessary desires, and to focus on the satisfaction of natural and necessary desires, leading us to our original nucleus of freedom and independence. This does not happen overnight but requires ongoing effort and practice. Hadot compares spiritual exercises to physical exercises, which, through repetition, give new form and strength to the body. The final goal of spiritual exercises is self-realization, which Hadot presents with the Plotinian image of sculpturing one's own statue by taking away what is superfluous (see Hadot 1995, 102). Hadot concludes that spiritual exercises are fundamentally "a return to the self, in which the self is liberated from the state of alienation into which it has been plunged by worries, passions, and desires" (Hadot 1995, 103).

Once liberated of egoistic and passionate individuality, what comes to light is the moral person, utter lucidity, knowledge of ourselves and the world, as well as human perfection reflecting divine perfection. By definition, the state of divine perfection remains inaccessible to humans; what is accessible is an ongoing practice of *philo-sophia* as the love of progress toward wisdom. The practitioner of philosophy is constantly torn between habitual and everyday life and the domain of consciousness and lucidity, inviting a total transformation of his vision, lifestyle, and behavior (Haot 1995, 103).

In disagreement with Hadot, John Cooper argues that Hadot's concept of spiritual exercises distorts the nature of the ancient philosophical

practice. Ancient spiritual exercises were not as central in the ancient world as Hadot believes. These exercises can be found only with certain Roman philosophers and educated people. In addition, Cooper claims that Hadot's language of spirituality seems to be too close to the modern existentialist concerns about the state of one's self, and at odds with ancient philosophers' commitment to using one's reason as the sole basis for one's way of life. Hadot seems to emphasize too much the importance of choice, self-transformation, and proper philosophical inspiration to live rationally, which damages the notion of spiritual exercises as such (see Del Nido 2018, 8-9). In his critique, Cooper states that Hadot's reflection on spiritual exercises subordinates rational inquiry, which is immanent for philosophical investigation. Intense emotional conviction can open the door to voluntaristic or even irrationalist accounts of philosophical practices. Following this logic, spiritual exercises become distractions from the cultivation of reason (see Cooper 2012).

Discussing whether Cooper's criticism of Hadot's reading of spiritual exercises is justified exceeds the purpose of this writing. Hadot seems to be aware that his interpretation of the term "spiritual exercises" may create anxieties due to the association of philosophical practices with religious devotion. Sometimes, he uses the adjectives "spiritual" and "existential" interchangeably, opening the door to an existentialist reading of his position.[7] In defense of Hadot, Daniel Del Nido argues that spiritual exercises with their imaginative, rhetorical, and cognitive techniques, as reintroduced by Hadot, are necessary for and successful at producing a way of integrating reason into human character (see Del Nido 2018, 7). With this, Del Nido refers to Hadot's claim that spiritual exercises cannot be reduced to a purely rational consideration, limited to abstract and theoretical analysis. Our pre-philosophical lives are governed by a routine that tilts us to perceive and interact with the world in ways that are familiar to us. Pleasure and pain can easily become the governing principles of our thoughts, emotions, and conduct, directing our lives away from our rational evaluation of our goals and desires (Del Nido 2018, 9). In Hadot's words:

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[7] See Matthew Sharpe. "Pierre Hadot (1922-2010)." *IEP – Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available online at <https://iep.utm.edu/hadot/#SH5a> (last time accessed on March 6, 2024).

> "Imagination and affectivity play a capital role here: we must represent to ourselves in vivid colors the dangers of such-and-such a passion and use striking formulations of ideas in order to exhort ourselves. We must also create habits and fortify ourselves by preparing ourselves against hardships in advance." (Hadot 1995, 284)

When analyzing spiritual exercises, Hadot is aware that this term involves several meanings. By referring to Philo of Alexandria and other ancient theologians and philosophers, Hadot distinguishes two types of spiritual exercises (Hadot 1995, 84). The first type comprises daily and continuous repetition of practice, such as research (*zetesis*), thorough investigation (*skepsis*), reading (*anagnosis*), listening (*akroasis*), attention (*prosoche*), self-mastery (*enkrateia*), and indifference to indifferent things. The second type includes reading, meditations (*meletai*), therapies of the passions, remembrance of good things, self-mastery, and the accomplishment of duties. These exercises do not completely overlap but give us a fairly complete panorama of Stoico-Platonic inspired philosophical therapeutics. The study of these exercises should follow this order:

> "First attention, then meditations and 'remembrances of good things,' then the more intellectual exercises: reading, listening, research, and investigation, and finally the more active exercises: self-mastery, accomplishment of duties, and indifference to indifferent things." (Hadot 1995, 84)

All these exercises are not exclusively the result of thought; they have to include the entire psychism of the practitioner (see Hadot 1995, 82). Consequently, even though fasting and bodily exercise, which are not primarily intellectual exercises, can be spiritual as well.

> "… these exercises in fact correspond to a transformation of our vision of the world, and to a metamorphosis of our personality." (Hadot 1995, 82)

It is not surprising then, that Hadot's writing became the source of inspiration for the advocates of practical philosophy. Guided by Xaojun Ding and Feng Yu's interpretation of philosophical practice as spiritual exercises, there are three philosophical practice characteristics that guarantee the spiritual exercises are fundamentally philosophical. These characteristics are truth orientation, wisdom orientation, and virtue orientation (see Ding & Yu 2022, 10-15).

Truth-directed spiritual exercises, in tandem with reason, help promote genuine human values and evaluate things as they really are. Consequently, playing a violent video game does not count as a truth-oriented exercise because it promotes a value illusion and fails to see things as they are (see Grimm & Cohoe 2021). The truth-oriented spiritual practices arouse in us the yearning for truth and allow us to assimilate what we believe to be true. Reason or rational insight and argument alone need spiritual exercises because the motivational powers of reason are limited. Spiritual exercises do not guarantee, but they help reason to secure a life lived in accord with one's value judgments.

Wisdom is the ultimate goal of spiritual exercises, leading people to truth and knowledge and help them see the world in its reality. Arnold I. Davidson argues that the philosophical way of life requires the practice of spiritual activities as the way to self-transformation, resulting in tranquility of the soul, self-sufficiency, and cosmic consciousness (see Davidson 1990). Ran Lahav's writing presents wisdom as being open to a broader world, allowing us to see the complexity of human reality and its diversity of meanings, aspects, and perspectives. The goal of philosophical practice is to create in practitioners a desire for wisdom and move them beyond their limited and superficial self-understanding (see Lahav 2006). Whether one should emphasize more wisdom as a process, remarkably encountered in Eastern philosophy, or wisdom as a product, usually interpreted in Western philosophy, remains an open question calling for further elaboration.

> "In the pursuit of wisdom, we should be concerned with the process that leads us towards wisdom, not just with obtaining wisdom and knowing its particular nature." (Ding & Yu 2022, 364)

In addition to truth and wisdom, philosophical practices invite us to cultivate virtue as a spiritual exercise. The meaning of virtue is one of the key themes in the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life: living well and living virtuously were two sides of the same coin. When talking about *eudaimonia* as the highest human good, Aristotle describes it as "activity of the soul in accord with virtue, and indeed with the best and most complete virtue, if there are more virtues than one" (Aristotle

1999, 9). Consequently, philosophical practice leads to a deeper understanding of virtue, enabling practitioners to better deal with their life challenges. A theoretical understanding of virtue alone is not sufficient if it does not lead to the application and transformation of the practitioner's life. In his interpretation of Plotinus, Hadot claims that there are different ways to reach the knowledge of the Good; however, "only the spiritual exercises of purification, of the practice of the virtues, of putting ourselves in order, allow us to touch the Good, to experience it" (Hadot 2005, 28). In view of virtues cultivating in our times, the advocates of practical philosophy refer to written practices as spiritual exercises. Writing and questioning allow the practitioner to grow in thoughtfulness and create new habits necessary for growth in virtue (see Bendik & Jeremy 2009). Tukiainen distinguishes between cognitive and practical virtue. Knowledge of the external world, which includes knowledge of values, feasibility, and appropriateness of all possible actions, enables one to lead a satisfying and morally acceptable life (Tukianen 2010).

Dialogical Character in Socrates as Practical Philosophy and Spiritual Exercises

In his impressive study of ancient Greek philosophy, Hadot starts with the assumption that the primary concern of the ancient philosophers is the "living praxis from which they emanated," (Hadot 1993, 10) *i.e.*, one should learn how to live and what lifestyle to embrace, which will affect their whole existence. Construction of a coherent theoretical unity of the universe and human society within it, was not as relevant as the living praxis. The oral tradition was an essential part of their living praxis; the written work was meant only as a material support for a spoken word intended to become spoken again. Referring to Arnold Davidson, the primary intent of ancient philosophy, especially in its dialogical character, was in Hadot's interpretation, "to form more than to inform" (Hadot 1960, 341). For this reason, Hadot claims that to philosophize means to learn how to dialogue, which he extensively elaborates on in the chapter "Learning to Dialogue," published in his book *Philosophy as the Way of Life* (see Hadot 2005, 89-92).

As the master of dialogue, Socrates seems to be more concerned with who his interlocutor is, and less with the matter of discussion. Socrates does not teach. As an annoying gadfly, he poses questions, repeats his statements, and continuously invites the interlocutor to become aware of their own position by examining their own conscience. In his hesitation to proclaim the original meaning of Socrates' dictum "Know thyself," Hadot states clearly:

> "It invites us to establish a relationship of the self to the self, which constitutes the foundation of every spiritual exercise. To know oneself means, among other things, to know oneself *qua non-sage*: that is, not as a *sophos*, but as a *philo-sophos*, someone on the way toward wisdom." (Hadot 2005, 90)

This knowing oneself includes separating that which we are from that which we are not, as well as examining one's conscience.

Socrates seems to be a master of being in dialogue with himself as well. Hadot presents a list of events with Socrates in deep meditation, in focusing on his thoughts, or in conversation with himself. By referring to Porphyry's description of Plotinus' life, Hadot concludes:

> "Only he who is capable of a genuine encounter with the other is capable of an authentic encounter with himself, and the converse is equally true. Dialogue can be genuine only within the framework of presence to others and to oneself. From this perspective, every spiritual exercise is a dialogue, insofar as it is an exercise of authentic presence, to oneself and to others." (Hadot 2005, 91)

Hadot sees Platonic dialogues as ideal dialogues, presenting the itinerary between Socrates and his dialogue partner and not as transcriptions of real dialogues. These dialogues are less theoretical or dogmatic expositions of truth; their primary purpose is the guidance of the interlocutor towards a determinate mental attitude. Hadot stresses the importance of this point:

> "We must let ourselves be changed, in our point of view, attitudes, and convictions. This means we must dialogue with ourselves, and hence we must do battle with ourselves." (Hadot 2005, 91)

Thus, the efficacy of a dialogue should be measured in the persuasion of the interlocutor after discovering the contradictions of their own position

and not in exposition or demonstration of truth. With his special method of teaching, Socrates keeps his interlocutor in dialectic tension, demanding "the explicit consent of the interlocutor at every moment" (Hadot 2005, 92). What counts is the road traveled together on which the interlocutor, the student, and the reader form their own thoughts and not the solution to a problem.

Hadot finishes the chapter with a twofold conclusion that the Platonic dialogue corresponds exactly with a spiritual exercise. First, the dialogue leads the interlocutor towards conversion, assuming that the interlocutor has a real desire to discover the truth and the Good, and is willing to submit to the rational demands of the Logos. Second, every dialectical exercise, as an exercise of pure thought and subjected to the demands of the Logos, turns the soul away from the sensible world and allows it to convert itself towards the Good (see Hadot 2005, 93).

Even though Socrates was a master of dialogue, his figure remains ambiguous, troubling, oddly disconcerting, and ironic, and Hadot understands him in this light (see Hadot 2005, 148-149). Our knowledge about historical Socrates is limited, and the testimonies about him hide more than reveal him.

> "Because he was himself masked, Socrates became the prosopon, or mask, of personalities who felt the need to take shelter behind him. It was from him that they got the idea both to mask themselves, and to use Socratic irony as a mask." (See Hadot 2005, 149)

Who is hiding behind Socrates? First, the testimonies and interlocutors who were involved in person in conversation with Socrates. Following this logic, Plato is the first one to use Socrates as a mask to hide himself. In Hadot's interpretation, Plato wants his own experience of conversation with Socrates to be the experience of the student reading Plato's dialogue. So, the reader is placed in the same situation as Plato was, *i.e.*, as Socrates' interlocutor: confused, full of doubt, discouraged, almost upset, and lacking confidence. While many Greek philosophers speak in the first person, Plato systematically avoids the use of the first person and uses Socrates as his own mask. For this reason, it is hard to distinguish between Plato's and Socrates' teachings; they seem to be identical.

It remains an unanswered question why Plato used the mask of Socrates, and after Plato, why so many contemporary philosophers, like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, publish with pseudonyms. The person hiding behind the mask of a great teacher wants to be identified with his teacher, *e.g.*, Plato with Socrates, Nietzsche with Wagner. However, this identification is ironic; Plato, Nietzsche, and others, by wearing masks and hiding behind someone else, spread their own teaching, presented as words of their teachers. Hadot claims that wearing a mask is a pedagogical necessity and also a psychological need (Hadot 2005, 151). A person wearing the mask wants to be seen shining through others because a direct confrontation with readers seems too painful.

Second, Socrates' interlocutors, or the readers exposed to Socrates, occasionally want to wear Socrates' mask as well as a refuge in moments of crisis and discouragement. When lacking courage and confidence in conversation, Socrates intervenes and takes the others' doubt and uneasiness upon himself. By transferring their personal uneasiness onto Socrates, they regain confidence in their dialectical research (see Hadot 2005, 149).

In his thought-provoking analysis of Socrates and Plato, Hadot argues that Plato's written dialogues are doubly weakened by imitating real oral dialogues with Socrates. Once written, the answers come under the author's control, which cannot be the case in oral conversations (see Hadot 2005, 153).

Whether or not Plato is authentic in his presentations of Socrates' philosophy remains a secondary question in Hadot's reflection. What matters to Hadot is the irony in Socrates' (or Plato's) teaching (see Hadot 2005, 154). Socrates seems to be split in two: Socrates, who knows in advance the result of the discussion, and Socrates, who travels with his interlocutor and demands from the interlocutor's total agreement. At the same time, the interlocutor is also split: the interlocutor prior to the conversation with Socrates, and the one who identifying with Socrates and gradually being transformed. The irony is, in fact, that Socrates wants to learn something from his interlocutor at the beginning. In the end, the interlocutor identifies entirely with Socrates, contemporarily with aporia and doubt for Socrates repeated claims that he knows nothing.

> "And yet, throughout the duration of the discussion, he has experienced what true activity of the mind is. Better yet, he has been Socrates himself. And Socrates is interrogation, questioning, and stepping back to take a look at oneself; in a word, he is consciousness." (Hadot 2005, 154)

Hadot argues that Socrates' enigmatic declaration: "I only know one thing: that is, that I do not know anything" should be interpreted as Socrates did not possess any transmissible knowledge. At the same time, Socrates, through his questioning, brings the interlocutor to the point of decision whether or not "he will resolve to live according to his conscience and to reason. … The individual thus finds him/herself called into question in the most fundamental bases of his action, and he becomes aware of the living problem he himself represents for himself." (Hadot 2005, 155). A few lines later, Hadot concludes that Socrates had no system to teach. His philosophy is an invitation to a new life, active reflection, and living consciousness.

Conclusion

Philosophy, with its old-new search for and examination of wisdom, struggles to follow its own mission in our time, featured by the age of information, artificial intelligence, nuances of subjectivism, fragmentation, in pursuit of a new synthesis, rediscovery of nature, search for eternity, rapid technological development, and much more. Recently, our time seems to be simultaneously complex and intriguing, placing each human in a challenging situation. Perhaps for the first time in human history, lack of knowledge cannot be taken as a possible answer. With just a few clicks, our devices offer extensive answers in almost all areas, something unprecedented in human history.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that having and using knowledge are distinct and different from each other (Aristotle 1999, 121). Having knowledge does not implicitly include using knowledge. Neither do we live in an enlightened age, ready to follow the best possible rational answers to our challenges, as Kant hoped for in his essay "What is Enlightenment?" (Kant 1983, 44). In so many ways, our

time seems to be similar to the time of Pythagoras, the first one calling himself a philosopher, a lover of knowledge, in distinction from the sophists, holders of knowledge. With an excessive reliance on the Internet, we are similar to the sophists, *i.e.*, holders of knowledge accessible through our devices. At the same time, the same devices do not enable us to aspire to the highest possible knowledge, that complex algorithms cannot grasp. To have an insight into the highest possible knowledge, one must prevail on the knowledge of the soul and the divine. To reach this kind of knowledge, the ultimate goal of every lover of wisdom, one needs to go beyond the intellectual exercises rooted in reason. Access to true knowledge is a matter of spiritual engagement, transcending the principles of the natural world. It is no wonder, then, that the founders of ancient Greek philosophy did not struggle to refer to philosophy as a spiritual activity, calling for examination and deeper understanding of their present understanding.

The search for this kind of knowledge remains the pivotal mission of our time for both philosophers and non-philosophers. As presented in the first chapter of this article, the appearance of practical philosophy in the past decades can be interpreted as a genuine desire to reach the highest possible knowledge, on the level of individual transformation and action and not just on the theoretical level. Human life, not human words, should reveal the amazing potentiality hidden in human nature, *i.e.*, to be in touch with the divine (Platovnjak 2018, 1043-1054). As already discussed, practical philosophy seems to be a new attempt in this direction, strengthening the search for the highest possible knowledge that humans can reach and cannot be left for the exclusive domain of human reason.

It would be incorrect to conclude that practical philosophy is alone in creating a new synthesis. Practical psychology attempts to reach something similar by applying psychological principles, theories, and new scientific discoveries, especially in the field of neurosciences, to everyday life situations. Psychological knowledge and techniques can help us solve problems, improve relationships, enhance personal development and performance, promote well-being, and support behavior change, all with a view of having more fulfilling lives. Practical philosophy and psychology may belong to the field of applied sciences, the purpose of which is to apply theoretical knowledge to more practical purposes.

The intention of this reflection is to present the practicality of theoretical knowledge as an expression of the spiritual need and desire to transform our lives. This transformation, as well as a serious engagement in spiritual life, should not be a project left to the individual's creativity in their existence in a self-created bubble, as modern subjectivism claims to be the case. A profound spiritual life is an intriguing and challenging path based on a genuine dialogue of the practitioner with themselves, other people, and their willingness to be open to the transcendent. Pierre Hadot's interpretation of ancient philosophy as a way of life remains a pivotal contribution to the contemporary struggle to station philosophical wisdom, both in academia and in daily life. As stated before, our challenge seems to be to follow Socrates' example and adequately engage in the process of dialogue, and not to elaborate a new philosophical system; there are many systems already out there.

Following Hadot's interpretation of Socrates, genuine dialogue is intended to be a spiritual exercise, understood as an exercise of the authentic presence of the self to the self and of the self to the others. What matters most in the dialogical process is the process of dialogical engagement leading towards better transformation of one's vision of the world and a metamorphosis of their personality, *i.e.*, a transformation of all aspects of their being: intellect, imagination, sensibility, and will.

In his publications, Hadot often refers to Saint Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, the Christian version of a Greco-Roman tradition of *askesis*, *i.e.*, the practice of spiritual exercises (Hadot 2005, 82). The relationship between the one making the spiritual exercises and their director and the importance of respect for one's freedom are the preconditions for a genuine experience of God.

In relatively detailed instructions about how to do *Spiritual Exercises*, Saint Ignatius emphasizes the specific role of the spiritual director, who accompanies the one making the spiritual exercises. Their relationship must be defined by freedom and respect for the one making the spiritual exercises.

> "Spiritual directors do not own the path that the retreatant follows, rather one must be free to choose from among the many possible alternatives available at any given moment." (Osorio 2005, 74)

Of course, a good director warns the retreatant making the spiritual exercises of possible dangers and pitfalls; however, all decisions have to be made by

them, and not by the director. The director's role is to create a comfortable working environment with sufficient warmth that may facilitate a closer encounter with God. This warmth allows the one making the spiritual exercises to be engaged with all their vital energies and capacities; warmth discloses the impasses and possible mistaken routes; warmth helps react against what does not seem to be in service, honor, and glory of God. This warmth is balanced with reserve, or the director's detachment, which protects the director from imposing their own spiritual experience on the one making the spiritual exercises, which is necessary for an authentic experience of freedom and God. Following the same line, the director is not supposed to over-explain or reflect too much on the suggested text for meditation, which might hinder the practitioner from tasting the richness of the text by themselves.

> "Giving the Exercises, then, is not, as contrary to common understanding, indoctrination, persuasion or debate of understanding and reason, rather it is creating adequate space so that the one making the Exercises may, with the help of method and order, arrive at an internal knowledge reaching a decision through some disordered affection." (Osorio 2005, 80)

The goal of making the spiritual exercises is to have a genuine and authentic experience of God. This experience is so personal and unique to the one making the spiritual exercises that his path or experience of God cannot be repeated by anybody else.

Practical philosophy, Hadot's interpretation of ancient philosophy as a way of life, and Saint Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* seem to share one common characteristic: to experience what the individual longs for in the depths of his or her being. When theoretical explanations do not lead to action and personal transformation, they leave us empty and unfulfilled. Socrates and his disciples believed in the power of dialogue as the way to the essence of human existence. Again, the beauty of fulfillment, as well as the struggle of the unfulfillment of human existence, cannot be theoretically explained; it has to be lived and experienced. This is possible only through personal commitment and ongoing effort, understood as reflections of one's longing and desire to enter the transcendental dimensions of existence. Since freedom is the essence of human nature, the path cannot be imposed or prescribed. What remains is the invitation to embrace the

spiritual journey. Proponents of practical philosophy, Socrates as a dialog partner, or the spiritual director in the spiritual exercises, can help and accompany us, but they cannot replace personal commitment.

To sum up, philosophy as a spiritual exercise is meant to be a practical, demanding effort and training, involving one's whole way of existence, in which nothing is omitted or excluded. In the age of abundance of information, omitted or superficially explored areas of human existence are questions related to the authentic connection with other people, the entire universe, and the meaning of life, covering existential questions related to our human nature, which has to include pain, suffering, and death. Philosophy is an art of living that cures us of our illness and teaches us a new way of life. By referring to *Phaedo* (Phaedo 67, c-d), Hadot stresses the importance of our reflection on death:

> "... training to die to one's individuality and passions, in order to look at things from the perspective of universality and objectivity" (Hadot 2005, 95).

This training includes the purification of the soul, placing the boundaries of the body, practicing the virtues, putting oneself in order, and allowing to be touched by the Good and God.

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