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## **SOPHIA PHILIA AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE**

**Abstract.** Philosophy can be understood as a spiritual practice because the purpose of philosophizing is the cultivation of the spiritual in man, of what can be subject to improvement, and change through reorientation and purification through the recurring act of intervention-cultivation. The effect of the practice of philosophy is not a mere improvement of the inner life, but a radical reorientation of the intentions under which it takes place. Philosophy, as a daily replayed act, means reworking inner paths, repetitively but not in the same way.

**Keywords:** *Sophia*, philosophizing, spiritual practice

### **Introduction**

*Philo-Sophia, Philia for Sophia*, the name for a fundamental quest of the Greek spirit, is, in fact, a syntagm that brings together an ideal and a pursuit, having essentially an emotional character, that of *tending towards*. So, the emotional movement of *tending toward*, of being in search of *Sophia*. *Sophia* belongs to God; it does not belong to man. *Sophia* is an ideal that is not known or mastered, yet it is something you move towards, certain that it is to be sought. It is the condition in which the ideal draws you towards it, the pursuit of this attraction is a reverse process, which is provoked by its infinite proximity, but which in every instance brings you closer to wisdom. So, it can only be a repetitive act, an ever-repeated

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effort. Therefore, the philosopher, in this understanding, can only have a constant exercise of seek, he daily replays his effort and emotion closer to *Sophia*. Philosophy is mainly linked to practice, to a steady emotional openness, but also to repetitiveness, to the daily routine. But this practice of the love of wisdom means no less benchmarks, which determine what is to be followed to maintain the path towards the goal.

So, philosophy can be understood as a spiritual practice, because the purpose of philosophizing is the cultivation of the spiritual in man, of what can be subject to improvement, and change through the act of reorientation and purification, *katharsis*, through the repeated act of intervention-cultivation. The essential point in this description of the philosophical act is that the effect of the practice of philosophy is not a mere improvement of the inner life, but a radical reorientation of the intentions under which it takes place. Philosophy, as a daily replayed act, means reworking inner paths, repetitively but not in the same way. Spiritual practice does not involve novelty as content. Plato's *Dialogues* exemplarily epitomize the path of investigation that involves the dialectical approach, the stake of the psychodrama proposed by the dialogue is the continuation by the reader in working with self, with what should be an inner effort to discover the truth, the truth. Such effort cannot be made once, nor can it be made linearly, as being an illuminating inner narrative. It is the challenge that *the Dialogues* leads to a repetition of the inner effort, a continual reiteration. It is, of course, each time a plus and a step forward in the resumption of the inner effort of investigation, but the starting point and the inner path are under the sign of the resumption. It constitutes the spiritual practice. This stake of the spiritual exercise, which cannot be but an inner guidance of a certain approach towards oneself, becomes increasingly important in the Platonic tradition, especially in Neoplatonism. Plotinus develops this way, which he considers privileged, namely, to put into a *symposium*, in a joint effort with a group of disciples, the search for the deeper meanings of a fragment of Plato considered essential (Remes 2008, 3). The hidden thought, what lies beyond the surface of the text, can be revealed by a joint inner effort, by an exercise in walking and orienting the mind inwards, towards the self. It is not, therefore, a way of discovering what the deeper meaning of the text might be through textual analysis, be it semantic analysis, or intertextuality,

through reference to the authors' texts as a whole or to the textual encounter between several authors. The internal resonance of the impact of certain utterances or readings is an act that must be repeated, always be repeated. This is because rereading does not result in new information but in deepening what was already understood and revealing its full meaning. This is why neither Plotinus nor the later Neoplatonists will ever aim to say anything new. They only wanted to reach higher steps of understanding what was supposed to be inspired, of what could not but be the expression of truth in the highest sense. The truth *reveals itself*, it cannot be revealed by an intellectual act, by a simple rational approach. Moreover, truth is not information. To expose oneself to the *Truth*, to be in the presence of the *Truth* means a different kind of relationship with it. *Truth* cannot be owned, you cannot have truth, in an informational form, truth does not mean specific content. The relationship with truth is a dynamic one, involving ups and downs, it is not like the intellectual mastery of the meaning of a statement but is found in terms of a relationship, a dynamic relation to something dynamic and from something that has its dynamics. Both the knower and what is to be known are dynamic entities. The dynamics of the knower are related to the existential momentum, which can be overcome both towards something more, deeper, but can also be lost, so towards something less in the power of knowing. This is why interest in formal logic is rather reduced in the Neoplatonic tradition since logical formalism does not account for this dynamism. The statements that appear in writings involving this perspective on truth cannot be seen as having informational consistency, as leading to a rationally consistent understanding, but rather as an approximation, as a testimony, a signal, of a degree of experience of the relationship with truth.

### **Philosophizing as Path of Trial**

This way of knowing should be seen as the way of working experimentally, yet not as scientific experiment is described from the modern era onwards. This is for a few reasons. These reasons include the fact that the observer is not in a position of constant observation but fluctuates in the ability to sustain a certain level of observation (the quality of the act of observing

involves several instances). Then what could be described as observation instruments, or means by which the experiment can be made, fluctuate themselves, are the sum of the approximation of a relational distance, in constant change. An analogous situation is described in quantum physics, where the theorizations of experimental possibilities at the microphysical level have brought to light the fact that the observer has an active role in influencing the experiment, which raises reservations about the possibility of obtaining 'objective' experimental results (d'Espagnat 2021, 90). The spiritual senses, which have recently been discussed by several authors and which cannot be addressed in the same way as the bodily senses, can be invoked here. It is not possible to describe analytically how they work, for example, it is an open question whether they work individually or synergistically. Spiritual perception has not been described in the same way by those who have invoked it because this very instance is linked to an understanding of the self that is influenced by historical time and cultural areas (Gavrilyuk 2023, 34). Not least the language and cultural universe in which this possibility of experiencing truth can be expressed.

It is obvious that the act of philosophizing, as described above, is related to the need to constantly rebuild a path of trial, of putting to the test the one who follows the path, the path as well as the meaning, what the path aims at. It is perhaps the most radical meaning of the search, of a search that takes on the character of the radical testing of all three aspects involved in the act of knowledge. It is a self-testing carried out as radically as possible, repeatedly repeated, then it is a testing of the path on which this self-testing can be carried out, and no less, of the effectiveness of achieving the goal of the act of philosophizing. Philosophy done with this intention can only be within the frameworks of spiritual experience because this practice is an inner one, it is the putting into practice of what can be within the frameworks of the self. The 'spiritual' designation must indicate what implies modification, dynamics, and reorientation.

### **Philosophizing on Unattainable**

A great philosophy opens new possibilities for thought, rather than giving it the limits within which it can operate. In this sense, Platonism is the

philosophy of the unattainable. This account should be understood not in the sense that no new things could be said in Plato's posterity, but the manner of Plato's writing does not trace a definite doctrinal outline, and the dialectical rationality of delimiting meanings by negation rather than affirmation always leaves room for further discourse. When Plato puts an idea into play, he does so because it turns out that there is a necessity of the march of thought for it to be uttered. There ought to be something at this moment of the unfolding of thought, and to this something, it is most appropriate to give this name. But this provisional state is never overcome. It is proper for man as a rational being to approach the truth about the world, but his limitation as a living being in the body will only enable him to be always on the way to this truth. In this sense the eminently practical character of Platonic philosophy can be understood, for the situation of living in the body means that the purpose of wisdom is always related to this state. The purpose of philosophy, as an act that is always limited, but which always gives an account of something concerning authentic reality, is fulfilled in the openness of a life always seeking Being. Of the highest realities, one can hardly say anything, and of the supreme reality it is more appropriate to be silent, therefore one's thoughts and utterances must always take this into account. Moreover, a proper life means only that one should always be open to the contemplation of the highest, which is what the specification of individual or community rules is for. This is why we run the risk of becoming too attached to the doctrine of Plato's *Ideas*. The formulation, always with a degree of the hypothetical, of a "place" where the true reality is to be found, never exceeds the horizon of practical necessity. Since human reason admits that we find ourselves in a degraded situation of reality, it is obvious that there should be a situation in which the Being is fully revealed. Thus, man always finds himself in the possibility of improvement. As long as he is alive, he will change his way of living and thinking, a situation that does not imply repeated self-denial, but an unceasing re-appreciation of the only authentic goal, the likeness of God, which means constant renunciation of what proves inimical to this likeness. This is how the theme of that excellence, *arete*, which Plato always posed, the philosophical approach results in finding the way to live, so that the supreme virtue, justice, is acquired. This is also the basis for the resignification of the *virtue* concept. The big

question of whether the acquisition of excellence can be the fruit of a technique has never left Plato. Although the investigation reveals the unworkability of a paradigm's application, it also reveals that the paradigm must play a role in the explanation so that the investigation will have to be resumed later. We see during the stages of Platonic meditation significant changes in the idea of virtue, and yet its essential meaning has never been set aside: that man should realize his essence as fully as possible, equivalent to the privileged ontological situation in which man achieves maximum resemblance to the Intelligible Reality (Vasiliou 2008, 12). This is why the terms of Platonic philosophy led to the exceptional situation that they were able to form the medium for latter philosophies, although these philosophies had in some cases different discourses. Perhaps the best testimony to the exceptional power of such a presentation of the concept is that when it was necessary to postulate the most difficult aspects of Christian dogma in confrontation with heresy, it was only possible to arrive at an answer by using the terms in which Plato understood to express his thinking.

### **Practicing Philosophy as Soteriology**

Plotinus' doctrine, with its obvious soteriological character, reveals how Plato was reread, since his interpretation sought only what pertained to *religious Platonism*, giving little interest to the other topics in *Dialogues*. This is the development of Plato's paradigm, the *ascent of the soul to a lost region*, an ascent that means *a recovery* (Hutchinson 2018, 8). It turns out, however, that when morality is given an increasingly clear mystical foundation, contradictory attitudes towards the value of *arete*, a concept that had acquired a paradoxical status, will not be long in coming. Plotinus, distinguishing between political and purifying virtues, notes that God does not need either. God has no virtue. The paradox is that we try to become like, through virtue, the one who has no virtue. The same contradictory situation concerning the meaning of virtue is expressed by Philo Alexandrinus, who had set out to reconcile the vision offered by the Old Testament writings with Greek thought. The interpretations produced in this perspective often lead to paradoxes, for it is not easy to

answer the question of whether virtue prepares us to come into the action of God. Virtue comes from us and does not depend on us; it is only a free divine gift and ends by not being the antithesis of man in the divine majesty. *Virtue* grants the possibility of ascending to the *One*, but it can only be born in the soul through a first union with the *One*. Thus, virtue leads to contemplation only because it is born of contemplation. After being uplifted by a generous impulse from on high, the soul, since cannot remain in the state of contemplation, must return to the practical life and here seeks the likeness of God which is *virtue*. The point of cultivating virtues is the prospect of a return to a purely spiritual life, but only if *virtue* becomes *wisdom*, and above all *a stable state*. This is the reason for establishing two steps in virtue. There are virtues connected with the community, like justice, prudence, strength, and moderation, which give the power to master the body and to live well with others. But a higher place is given to purifying virtues, those which enable the soul to separate itself as much as possible from bodily life and to enter the contemplative state which has only one object: *One*.

### Christian Meanings of Philosophy as a Spiritual Practice

The distinction between *esoterike* and *exoterike* in philosophical exercise, *i.e.* between outer and inner philosophy (Cavarnos 1968, 15). By *outer philosophy*, the ancient Greek philosophy, and the Neoplatonic philosophy of the first Christian centuries. What was of interest in the learning and exercise of the non-Christian philosophical tradition was the mind's training in accurate and truthful thinking. The focus was on *how* and not on *what*, on forming the ability to discern, since any higher spiritual experience has many dangers, especially the risk of dwindling in own imagination, as long as the rational capacities are not well shaped. Much more complex was the understanding of *inner philosophy*. It could mean, on the one hand, the Christian teaching as a body of doctrines, ideas, and methods transmitted orally or in writing. It is philosophy because in these teachings Wisdom itself is revealed, the eternal Logos, who took flesh. In another sense, was designated the lived Christian teaching. At this level, the emphasis is philosophy as practicing Christian virtues.

This experience of Christian doctrine is called 'philosophy' because the fulfillment of the commandments always has an unrepeatable character, although common in spirit. It is enough to mention the case of the pillars. Certain forms of spiritual need, especially inner peace, and inner need were designated under the name of *philosophy*. This meaning becomes increasingly important starting from the 13<sup>th</sup> century when hesychasm becomes a major spiritual and cultural theme. Philosophy also simply meant the love of God. But another meaning of the use of the term was also that of designating monastic life and principles. We see that the meanings of inner philosophy are not only complex but also always nuanced. They cannot be framed by any formal attempt at definition, and more than that, new meanings can be added at any time. The value of outer philosophy was never underestimated. From Gregory of Nyssa and Basil the Great to the last humanists of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the propaedeutic importance of classical Greek education was always emphasized (Cavarnos 1968, 22).

The inner philosophy does not follow the Greek classic rationality: its specificity is given by what is distinctive to each person in communion with the *Logos*, with *God*. This is the reason why this part of philosophizing is beyond speech, it names the depth of the personal relation between the Creator and the creature, a relationship always unique and non-repeatable. Nevertheless, reason is not absent from this experience, but takes superior forms which cannot be simply placed in a discursive expression. But this is also the place where the paradoxicality of this expression lies: an experience that does not exceed reason, but it cannot be put into words either. This is the most practical dimension of philosophy, one that involves the entire being, and all the human capacities, and has therefore a change of man in his depth which received the name *metanoia* in the patristic works. It means a change of mind but not as in a modification of its function, a decrease or alteration of its rational capacities, but an opening of it to understanding what above Creation is, a *participation* in the uncreated. Therefore, *metanoia* also means *theosis*, the Greek name for deification: man is being deified, meaning that in some way he overcomes creation, and thus he has access to knowledge that is beyond the world frames. But the consequences of this experience are ample, they entail the whole human being. Understanding



the *person* as the ground of reality and philosophy as an existential exercise meant to prepare the personal experience of the other (God or man), constituted key elements in the novelty brought by the Christianity (Zizioulas 2006, 111).

## Conclusion

The most important aspect of Christian philosophy as a spiritual practice is *betterment*, understood as the process of enhancing the human. This progress, or *betterment*, as it is termed, can be described as attaining somebody's "measure". This is because somebody's identity is not a mere configuration of psychophysiological characters, but a virtual tendency that can be more or less actualized through spiritual practice. Yet this road to betterment requires guidance, and this guidance is an act that cannot be done by following a manual, or a book, because of the concreteness and non-repeatability of a *personal mode of existence*. It was used the ancient Greek word *mystagogia* for this guidance, to indicate that there is rather an initiation than a teaching, than something related to the classical *paideia* (Golitzin 2013, 451). This formative path is the missing aspect of today's education. We need today a formative strategy that should compensate for the development of practical or theoretical abilities, this compensation being an *initiation process* as personal guidance dedicated to concrete and unique persons. This mystagogical approach can be described as the *discovery of what is non-repeatable* and, in that way can unleash the human potential, otherwise insufficiently initiated by the current educational strategies.

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