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SPIRITUALITY AS PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

Abstract. In this essay, I shall use Hadot's critical framework for considering the uneasy modern relationship between philosophy and the Christian spiritual tradition, rooted as it is in the ancient forms of spiritual exercise. I will begin with a brief sketch of this relationship, paying particular attention to some ways that Christian spirituality influenced philosophy in early modernity. From there, I shall turn to the work of Bernard Lonergan in order to develop a proposal for a contemporary spirituality of discernment as a philosophical practice. Lonergan, a Jesuit trained in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, built his philosophical project on the template of those exercises, inviting people to practices of self-appropriation for the purpose of exploring how discernment in a community can transform societies, reversing decline and promoting patterns of growth. Lonergan's method, I shall argue, offers a way of coming to understand the spirituality of discernment as a form of philosophical practice that heals the problems that Hadot diagnoses in modern philosophy.

Keywords: self-appropriation, discernment, spiritual exercise, first philosophy

Introduction: the Problem of Modern Philosophy

Pierre Hadot's analysis of ancient philosophy as spiritual exercise has offered to modern philosophers and historians of philosophy not only a hermeneutic by which to approach the ancient world, but also a critique of early modern and contemporary philosophical practice (Hadot 1995, 2020). Hadot described his task as attempting to grasp what Goethe called the

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Urphänomene that is philosophy[2] – the original, unadulterated, primordial phenomenon that is the discipline and practice of *philosophia* – and in so doing, to "eliminate the preconceptions the word philosophy may evoke in the modern mind" (Hadot 1995, 53). Modern philosophy, he argues, has become self-referential, "a reason grounded in itself," too often falling into the pattern of exegesis of philosophical texts. Philosophical discourse is about philosophical discourse.

The recovery of the *Urphänomene* is for Hadot about the *practice* of philosophy, as distinct from the *content* sought by exegetes. His use of the term "spiritual exercises" to describe this *Urphänomene* represents a careful attempt to get at the comprehensiveness of what philosophy was originally about, and ought still to correspond to: "a transformation of our vision of the world, and to a metamorphosis of our personality" (Hadot 1995, 82). He rejects, in turn, the terms "psychic," "moral," "ethical," "intellectual," "of thought," and "of the soul," all of which fail to get at the kind of fundamental change that true philosophy effects in the person. He writes:

> "The word 'spiritual' is quite apt to make us understand that these exercises are the result, not merely of thought, but of the individual's entire psychism." (Hadot 1995, 82)

They had as their goal "the transformation of our vision of the world, and the metamorphosis of our being. They therefore have not merely a moral, but also an existential value" (Hadot 1995, 127). He writes:

> "The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to *be* more fully, and makes us better. It is a conversion which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it. It raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom." (Hadot 1995, 83)[3]

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[2] Hadot's invocation of Goethe is surely not accidental. Goethe's important neologism referred to his "specific epistemological mediation between idealism and empiricism and opens onto a notion of intuitive understanding" (Meixner 2022).

[3] In this quote, Hadot is introducing the central theme of philosophy as spiritual exercise in the ancient world, specifically in the Hellenistic and Roman contexts. The quote offers an overview of the Stoic approach to philosophy in particular.

The fundamental problem of modern philosophy, he asserts, is that it has lost touch with this animating method, focusing instead on abstractions that do not foster conversion. All of philosophy is about transformation. Arnold I. Davidson parses Hadot's approach to the three parts of philosophy – logic, physics, and ethics – and observes that for Hadot, all of them (not only ethics) are implicated in spiritual exercise: "there is a practical or lived logic, a lived physics, and a lived ethics" (Davidson 1995, 24). Seeking a return to the *Urphänomene* involves, therefore, a kind of *ressourcement*, which Simone D'Agostino describes in Hadot's work as "a present-day surfacing of the original – hence implicitly first and genuine – aspect of philosophy, at the expense of a certain aspect that emerged later" (D'Agostino 2023, 6).

To be sure, Hadot held that there has been some recovery of the ancient model in figures such as Goethe, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, the young Hegelians, Marx, Thoreau, Bergson, the existentialists, Wittgenstein, and Foucault (Hadot 1995, 108). Healing modern philosophy would mean accounting for its historic missteps away from the purpose of spiritual exercise. It would re-center spirituality as a philosophical practice, understanding that its purpose is conversion to greater authenticity. This healing would regard philosophical conceptualization and abstraction not necessarily as misguided, but would emphasize that such movements of intelligence are ultimately in service to the transformation of the person and, equally importantly, the flourishing of the community of persons[4]. Ancient philosophy, Hadot writes, was fundamentally a community effort, with the aim being not only the transformation of the self, but also the transformation of society and the well-being of cities[5].

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[4] Against the charge that philosophical practice of the Stoics and Platonists was only about the self, Hadot writes: "In my view, the feeling of belonging to a whole is an essential element: belonging, that is, both to the whole constituted by the human community, and to that constituted by the cosmic whole. Seneca sums it up in four words: *Toti se inserens mundo*, 'Plunging oneself into the totality of the world'." (Hadot 1995, 208).

[5] "Ancient philosophy required a common effort community of research, mutual assistance, and spiritual support. Above all, philosophers – even, in the last analysis, the Epicureans – never gave up having an effect on their cities, transforming society, and serving their citizens" (Hadot 1995, 274).

In this essay, I shall use Hadot's critical framework for considering the uneasy modern relationship between philosophy and the Christian spiritual tradition, rooted as it is in the ancient forms of spiritual exercise. I will begin with a brief sketch of this relationship, paying particular attention to some ways that Christian spirituality influenced philosophy in early modernity. From there, I shall turn to the work of Bernard Lonergan in order to develop a proposal for a contemporary spirituality of discernment as a philosophical practice. Lonergan, a Jesuit trained in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, built his philosophical project on the template of those exercises, inviting people to practices of self-appropriation for the purpose of exploring how discernment in a community can transform societies, reversing decline and promoting patterns of growth (Murray 2007, Whelan 2013). Lonergan's method, I shall argue, offers a way of coming to understand the spirituality of discernment as a form of philosophical practice that heals the problems that Hadot diagnoses in modern philosophy.

Christian Spirituality and Philosophy in Modernity

To the casual observer, Christian spirituality and philosophy represent different conceptual worlds, with different vocabularies, histories, and methodologies. Philosophy, of course, has a history that one can trace without much controversy to the ancient Greek world. As a loan word from Greek, *philosophy* can be traced quite literally to ancient texts.

Spirituality, on the other hand, is an amorphous term with no such clear history. In antiquity, the word *spiritus* appears in both classical and Christian sources, but its meaning varies: it refers in some cases to wind or breath;[6] in others to pride or arrogance;[7] in still others to the presence of a god.[8] In the Vulgate, though, it appears frequently to translate either the Hebrew *ruah* or the Greek *pneuma*. In the latter case, its referent is

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[6] As in Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 2, 54, 136: "*aspera arteria excipiat animam eam, quae ducta sit spiritu*".

[7] Cicero, *De Lege Agraria* 2, 34, 93: "*quem hominem! quā irā! quo spirtu*!"

[8] Cicero, *De Natura Deorum 2, 7, 19: "haec fieri non possent, nisi ea uno divino et continuato spiritu continerentur".*

frequently the Holy Spirit, though there are uses (such as Mark 6:7 and Luke 8:2) that retain a more generic reference to evil spirits. Centuries later, Augustine's use of *spiritus* will retain some of these references to evil spirits (*e.g.* "those who are possessed and held by the spirits of iniquity" and "I am convinced that you are now free from these evil spirits") (Augustine 1959, 161), but more often will follow Saint Paul's use of *pneuma* and its related forms.[9]

The provenance of the English word *spirituality* is ambiguous, to say the very least. For example, in the 16th century, the word referred to the power of the Church, used in juxtaposition to the term *temporality* in reference to the state[10]. During that same period, the adjective *spiritual* was sufficiently clear in Christian literature, referring to the ways of living a Christian life[11]. According to academic consensus, the modern concept of *spirituality* (including its cognate words across Europe) as a form of practice emerged in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, in part because of the rise of laity in the post-Reformation church (Roldán-Figueroa, 2021, 497)[12]. There is, to be sure, an extensive literature about mystical and ascetical theology that dates back to the earliest centuries of the church, and commentaries on the Bible have invoked reflection on

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9 Consider Augustine's Sermon 242, in which he comments on Paul's letter to the Galatians (chapter 5): "Not without reason have those bodies been termed 'spiritual.' They have not been called 'spiritual' because they will be spirits, not bodies. As a matter of fact, those bodies which we now possess are called 'soul-infused' bodies, yet they are not souls, but bodies. Just as our bodies are now called 'soul-infused,' yet are not souls, so those bodies are called 'spiritual' without being spirits, because they will be bodies. Why, then, is it called a spiritual body, my dearly beloved, except because it will obey the direction of the spirit? Nothing in yourself will be at variance with yourself; nothing in yourself will rebel against yourself. No longer will there be that which the Apostle laments in the passage: 'The flesh lusts against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh'." (Augustine 1959, 271).

10 The Oxford English Dictionary dates the first usage of the term to 1417. A century and a half later, Stapleton (1565, 144) uses the word "Spirituality" to refer polemically to Catholic bishops, in contrast to the temporal authority of the prince. Compare Lyndesay (1602), in which he names the first two estates "Temporalitie" and "Spiritualitie."

11 See, for example, Thomas More's use of the word 100 times in his work (More 1557).

12 Roldán-Figueroa's article offers a detailed history of the use of the term across Europe, and makes the persuasive case that 17th century Spain is where its development impacted the modern meaning of spirituality.

pneumatology, Christian discipleship, prayer, mystagogy, ethics, and other themes related to the modern understanding of spirituality (McGinn 2004-2021). Only over the last century, though, has the term *spirituality* garnered attention in academic literature.

The ambiguity of spirituality, in contrast to philosophy, has meant that the literature about spirituality has not generally been part of the academic study of philosophy, let alone the subject of philosophical reflection. This observation is evident in the philosophical literature of recent years. Christina Gschwandtner recently observed that in the main database for articles in philosophy, only 1800 articles about spirituality (compared to 50,000 about religion) were listed, and most of those having to do with bioethics and "the benefits of spirituality in a medical setting" (Gschwandtner 2021, 421). To be sure, there is a well-established history of the Philosophy of Religion, and in recent years there has been a growing literature of the study of Spirituality[13]. The slippage in attempts to define terms, especially the overlapping categories of religion and spirituality, means that there are no agreed-on methodologies for approaching spiritual literature for the sake of discerning its contributions to the history of philosophy.

One important effect of this methodological lacuna is that common treatments of the history of philosophy tend to overlook spiritual literature, even when that literature might contribute to an understanding of the way that philosophical insights have been influenced by spirituality. For example, Christina Van Dyke demonstrates in her book *A Hidden Wisdom* that presumption about what "counts" as philosophy, together with prejudice against the writings of women, led to the exclusion of significant women writers from accounts of the development of medieval philosophy[14]. She summarizes the hermeneutical issue well:

> "Because the Christian tradition acknowledges mystical experiences and knowledge of God's hidden truths as granted by God via an act of grace, the philosophy and

[13] See Gschwandtner (2021) for a helpful overview of some of the literature defining the study of spirituality.

[14] Van Dyke (2022) points to prominent treatments such as Stephen Boulter's *Why Medieval Philosophy Matters* (2019) and the *Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology* (2020), both of which include not a single woman writer, even though a number were very active in the periods treated.

> theology of mysticism and contemplativism can never be simply the purview of the powerful: they are available to anyone and everyone God chooses." (Van Dyke 2022, xxi)

The literature of the medieval period, which she describes as mystical or contemplative (favoring the latter term), is important not only as a body of literature about self-knowledge, reason and love, God and immortality; but also, as an expanded corpus of reflective literature that offers insights to historians about the ways that ideas helped to shape the Medieval world and its aftermath.

Christia Mercer echoes this insight, similarly pointing to the effect that Medieval spirituality influenced later writers.

> "Between 1250 and 1500, a form of spiritual meditation arose, which included new accounts of the role of self-knowledge in the pursuit of knowledge of God. Not only were many of the most prominent of these meditations written by women, they contain philosophical insights about self-knowledge, the relation between mind and body, and the cognitive benefits of suffering." (Mercer 2017)

Mercer takes as her example Descartes, and argues that his *Meditations* was influenced directly by the *Interior Castle* of Teresa of Ávila, a spiritual classic throughout Europe in the 17th century. His use of the genre of meditation was deliberate, Mercer argues, in order to show the contours of his spiritual journey[15]. Like so many authors before him who followed Augustine's "return into myself" (Augustine 1991) before advancing in knowledge of the truth, Descartes begins his meditations with an inward turn. His method, she writes, mirrors that of Teresa:

> "Each expects to lead meditators to certainty about fundamental truths, each employs demonic deception as a strategic means to that goal, and each transforms the common deceiving-demon trope into something with a powerful epistemological punch." (Mercer 2017, 2548)

Van Dyke's and Mercer's essays are the tip of an iceberg. The question that they raise is a critical one not only for understanding the history of

[15] Compare Gaukroger (1995, 336): "The *Meditationes* read like an account of a spiritual journey in which the truth is only to be discovered by purging, followed by a kind of rebirth. The precedents for this seem to come from writers such as Ignatius Loyola, and more generally from the manuals of devotional exercises at this time."

philosophy (and particularly philosophy by women); it is also a question about philosophy itself. What (who) counts?

Mercer narrates the way that the "new philosophy" that began with Descartes was really a creation of 19th and 20th century German scholars like Kuno Fischer and Ernst Cassirer, who were influenced by the ways that Hegel and Kant interpreted history (Mercer 2017, 2540)[16]. That narration, she argues, is limited by the hermeneutical perspectives shaped by attention to a rationalist *Geist*, and thus elides or ignores distinctions that emerged, in the examples above, by women whose interior lives were shaped profoundly by Christian spiritual practices. What else has the tradition failed to take seriously? What other hermeneutics might open space for careful exploration of the influence of women or men immersed in spirituality who raise properly philosophical questions and engage in philosophical practices, such as self-ordering, discernment, and love?

Spirituality as Infinite Desire

Clare Carlisle offers a way for contemporary philosophy to attend to the fruits of spiritual practice. Pushing against the tendency to view spirituality through the lens of William James' notion of "religious experience," she focuses instead on practice: what she describes as "knowledge-by-acquaintance, acquired by long practice, which is conveyed by the phrase 'an experienced practitioner', rather than what is suggested by the phrase 'a religious experience'" (Carlisle 2019, 430). She describes practice as a species of habit:

> "habit is a contraction of a person's sphere of activity and experience, while practice tends toward development and growth." (Carlisle 2019, 431)

A key element constituting habit is desire, which she describes as that which "animates" the other elements (repetition, receptivity, and resistance) (Carlisle 2010, 2014). She points to Félix Ravaisson's work *De L'habitude* (1838), in which he specifies that all habit is animated by desire for the good, and ultimately for God.

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[16] Mercer cites K. Fischer 1854-1877; 1878; E. Cassirer 1932.

Practice is for Carlisle a refinement of desire, oriented toward a practitioner's perception of the outcome, even though that perception may as yet be indeterminate (Carlisle 2019, 436). She uses Talbot Brewer's description of human life as being marked by a "continuous awakening to the good, not full apprehension of it," suggesting that spiritual practice amounts to a dialectic of practicing and conceiving of the good (Carlisle 2019, 436-7)[17]. Within the Christian spiritual tradition, the goal is conceived as knowledge and love of God. Perhaps by contrast, in Buddhist tradition the goal is conceived as liberation or enlightenment, but in both cases, she writes, "practice is oriented by desire for a good that is not only an indeterminate object, but not an object at all" (437). There is a certain aphophaticism in the practice, to the extent that one cannot be sure either about the object of desire or about how one might enjoy it. The desire is infinite, open-ended, indeterminate.

What is distinctive is that the desire is experienced as reciprocal. Carlisle's essay involves reflection on interviews she conducted with Christian and Buddhist monks, and this theme of reciprocity applied to both: the practitioners described their experience as "not simply as desiring, but as being-desired." Later, she elaborates:

> "And the agency at work in the religious life is understood by practitioners – if not universally, then often enough to be taken seriously – to have its source beyond themselves; the good to which their practice aspires is not envisaged simply as a not-yet-realized and not-quite-specified ideal, but as an already active power, and this allows us to see the desires grounded in this good to be reciprocal rather than unilateral, cosmic as well as individual." (Carlisle 2019, 442)

The specific spiritual practices the monks engage in are oriented toward infinity and indeterminacy, lest they devolve into finite desires, which theistic traditions describe as idolatry. These practices, she writes, offer ways of inhabiting the tension of specific, embodied practice (on the one hand) and the aspiration of infinite good (on the other). She describes these practices as dialectical: "their repetitions enact a receptivity and overcome a resistance to what is not entirely known and specifiable in advance" (442).

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[17] She cites an unpublished essay by Talbot Brewer, "Desire and creative activity."

Carlisle closes her essay by observing the implications for philosophy of considering spirituality as infinite desire. Reading historical sources means engaging the authors' experiences, and being open to the ways that their experiences help us to re-interpret our own. I find this approach to be helpful in considering the question of how to approach spirituality as a philosophical practice. Conceiving of spirituality as involving a dialectic between immediate desire (say, for peace or belonging to a religious community) and infinite desire – an opening toward whatever else might unfold as a consequence of spiritual exercise – situates spirituality within the long tradition described by Hadot as involving personal and communal transformation. Taking spirituality seriously, in other words, means opening oneself to the possibility of navigating between immediate desire and the possibility of transformation within the self that moves in an infinite direction, a direction that a person may eventually come to thematize through appeal to the language of religious traditions.

That thematization – the appeal to traditional religious language or scripture or devotional practice – is not necessarily *a priori* a move away from dialectical philosophical method. It is possible to conceive of spirituality, even spirituality practiced within the confessions and practices of a particular tradition (Stoic, Buddhist, Orthodox Christian) – as philosophy. I will argue below that in fact a spirituality rooted in self-appropriation is a first philosophy, a heuristic structure that moves in the direction of infinite desire open to the possibility of receptivity to God.

Self-Appropriation as First Philosophy

I return to Hadot's description of the ancient form of philosophy as spiritual exercise:

> "The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to *be* more fully, and makes us better. It is a conversion which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it. It raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom." (Hadot 1995, 83)

Clare Carlisle's description of spirituality as infinite desire helps us to return to Hadot's notion, by alerting us to the danger of truncating human experience and understanding by limiting our concern to the cognitive level. If the object of philosophy is wisdom, truth, goodness, beauty, or other transcendental notions – that is, objects of understanding that lie beyond my present, synchronic capacities for apprehension, but towards which I nevertheless strive diachronically – then philosophy itself is rooted in infinite desire, a desire that opens one to ever-greater insights. Examining the way those insights unfold, then, is a starting point for further consideration of the transcendent dynamism proper to philosophy. Toward this end, I turn to Bernard Lonergan, to explore first his cognitional theory and then his methodology.

Lonergan, like Descartes, roots his philosophy in a turn to the subject; and also, like Descartes, he demonstrates a significant reliance on important elements of spiritual exercise after the manner of Ignatius of Loyola (Allen 2017). Both were formed in Ignatian pedagogy: Descartes as a student at the Collège La Flèche, Lonergan as a Jesuit priest. Jeremy Wilkins further highlights the similarities between the two thinkers: a commitment to transformative exercises of consciousness; a love of the clarity of mathematics; a desire to re-ground philosophy, and a wariness of imagination and its effect on intelligence (Wilkins 2018). But he goes on to distinguish Lonergan's approach from that of Descartes:

> "But Lonergan's turn is not to the subject as object, as intuited. It is to the subject as subject, as inquirer and lover, open to the world in fact as *potens omnia fieri* [able to do all things], open in fragile achievement, open in unmerited giftedness." (Wilkins 2018, 173)

Descartes, Wilkins says, might easily slide into solipsism, whereas Lonergan is attuned to a subject's dynamic of question and answer that fundamentally orient him toward the world and toward others (Wilkins 2018, 175).

Where Descartes' subject is a *res cogitans* who brackets the world in a kind of spiritual exercise of withdrawal, Lonergan's subject is a flesh-and-blood human being asking real-time questions about the world in the hope of healing it (Whelan 2013, 8). He establishes a cognitional theory not in the manner of a Cartesian search for clear and distinct

ideas, but rather as a way to name the process by which human beings spontaneously ask questions, seek insights, refine their questions, and unfold the intelligibility of the world. For Lonergan, the desire to know is unrestricted, echoing Carlisle's description of infinite desire. It reaches for the whole of being, and thus apprehends being heuristically, moving in the direction of greater and greater intelligence open to whatever intelligibility is to be found in the process, including God. The preface to his first magnum opus, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* indicates his purpose, and indeed illustrates the way he both borrows from and distinguishes himself from Descartes.

> "just as insight into insight yields a clear and distinct idea of clear and distinct ideas, just as it includes an apprehension of the meaning of meaning, just as it exhibits the range of the a priori synthetic components in our knowledge, just as it involves a philosophic unification of mathematics, the sciences, and common sense, just as it implies a metaphysical account of what is to be known through the various departments of human inquiry, so also insight into the various modes of the flight from understanding will explain (1) the range of really confused yet apparently clear and distinct ideas, (2) aberrant views on the meaning of meaning, (3) distortions in the a priori synthetic components in our knowledge, (4) the existence of a multiplicity of philosophies, and (5) the series of mistaken metaphysical and antimetaphysical positions." (Lonergan 1992, 6)

Later in his book, he will name his search for insight into insight a cognitional theory: "in any philosophy it is possible to distinguish between its cognitional theory and, on the other hand, its pronouncements on metaphysical, ethical, and theological issues. Let us name the cognitional theory the basis, and the other pronouncements the expansion" (Lonergan 1992, 412). Cognitional theory, for him, is a first philosophy if we approach philosophical questions as beings capable of asking questions[18]. Wilkins explains that for Lonergan, cognitional theory is fundamentally a method, a

[18] Wilkins (2018, 144) writes: "In a 1957 paper to the American Catholic Philosophical Association, …Lonergan situated his procedure in *Insight* within the context of 'the standard Aristotelian and Thomist distinction between what is first *quoad se* and what is first *quoad nos*.' Aquinas had established knowledge on metaphysical principles, while in *Insight* Lonergan had established metaphysics on cognitional principles." He cites Lonergan 1988, 143.

set of exercises by which a person moves toward insight into insight[19]. "*Insight* is the imperfect realization of Lonergan's intention to prepare 'a set of exercises' for rational self-appropriation," on the model of John Henry Newman's *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Wilkins 2018, 133). Lonergan offers a phenomenology of inquiry.

> "For Lonergan, what is 'basic' in the basic and total horizon is the subject; and self-knowledge, self-appropriation, and transcendental method are for him explicitly 'first philosophy'." (Wilkins 2018, 142 and 149-50).

The person committed to the ongoing process of self-appropriation becomes aware of the dynamism of the desire to know. Over time, the person understands that desire as unrestricted: it desires the whole of being (Lonergan 1992, 695)[20]. It is quite the opposite of solipsism: the move to interiority is ultimately for the purpose of discerning the world anew with a capacity for wonder.

> "It is only through the long and confused twilight of philosophic initiation that one can find one's way into interiority and achieve through self-appropriation a basis, a foundation, that is distinct from common sense and theory, that acknowledges their disparateness, that accounts for both and critically grounds them both." (Lonergan 2017, 82)

Interiority, in this account, is a sophisticated and disciplined practice of ever-renewing appropriation of one's dynamism of asking and answering questions, moving toward understanding, judgment, and decisions. It moves a person beyond the unreflective habits grounded in common sense (governed, as they often are, by uncritical mimesis), in the direction of ever-greater understanding of the whole of being. A person comes to understand the world as intelligible, and that intelligibility gives rise to a desire for the good, for ethics. For that desire propels a person beyond the restrictions of common sense into a new, intellectual pattern of

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[19] "Lonergan's 'first philosophy' is not first in a hierarchy of discourses, but first in an order of methodical controls; it is not ontologically but methodologically basic and prior to particular sciences; it is first as the science of sciences in a context where sciences are defined by their methodologies rather than by their subjects" (Wilkins 2018, 132).

[20] He writes, "being is the objective of the detached, disinterested, unrestricted desire to know."

experience, which Aristotle described as the beginning of all science and philosophy (Lonergan, 2005, 86).[21] That desire is infinite, and as such it "correctly heads towards an unrestricted act of understanding, towards God" (Lonergan 1992, 711). Moreover,

> "There is to human inquiry an unrestricted demand for intelligibility. There is to human judgment a demand for the unconditioned. There is to human deliberation a criterion that criticizes every finite good. So, it is … that man can reach basic fulfilment, peace, joy, only by moving beyond the realms of common sense, theory, and interiority and into the realm in which God is known and loved." (Lonergan 2017, 81)

Self-appropriation is first philosophy because it is a reflective taking-hold of oneself, unfolding a dynamism of desire that is unrestricted, infinite. But self-appropriation itself is neither spontaneous nor instantaneous; it is rather cumulative, predicated on the spiritual exercise that is discernment, to which we now turn.

Self-Appropriation as Discernment

> Philosophy finds its proper data in intentional consciousness. Its primary function is to promote the self-appropriation that cuts to the root of philosophic differences and incomprehensions. (Lonergan 2017, 91)

Patrick Byrne points to Lonergan's notion of self-appropriation as a form of discernment, a "refined form of attention" rooted in both classical and Christian practices (Byrne 2016, 13-14 and 31-32). It involves a "double intentionality," which Byrne describes as "attentiveness to the matter at hand, but also attentiveness to one's own way of being attentive." Like ancient practices that were the subject of Hadot's research, discernment presupposes "a development or even transformation of the person engaged in discernment" (Byrne 2016, 15). It aims at what is deepest in a person and is ordered toward not only an object of understanding, but also a way of living (Byrne 2016, 16).

Byrne points to the roots of Lonergan's understanding of discernment in the work of Aristotle, Saint Paul, and Ignatius of Loyola. Aristotle highlights

[21] He cites Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.2 982b 12-18; 983a 12-18.

the careful work of dialectic; Paul reflects on the role of the Holy Spirit; and Ignatius attends to the dynamics of interiority by which a person comes to choose between directions of desire and to know the will of God. Attending to these complementary aspects of discernment will shed light on how a spirituality rooted in discernment is a form of philosophical practice.

Byrne begins with Aristotle's clarification of dialectic, which arises out of ordinary experience as a method to achieve refinement in one's thinking. In such works as *Topics*, *Sophistical Refutation*s, and *Rhetoric*, Aristotle draws from the Socratic/Platonic tradition to highlight the move from *endoxa* to *epistêmê*, from the opinions of reputable people to true knowledge. Lonergan, as we've seen, was similarly interested in the move from common sense to the intellectual pattern of experience as a way of refining one's thinking. Aristotle, though, focuses on the way that reputable people already have a potency (*dunamis*) to seek the true, which can awaken the desire for truth in others. Dialectic unfolds when interlocutors have a shared orientation toward the truth and are willing to engage in conversation (*dialegesthai*) that sharpens their mutual ability to work toward knowledge. Only in the context of *euphuia*, a disposition towards the good, can true discernment unfold. That disposition to the good may remain dormant or, worse, can lead a person to settle on lesser goods when greater goods are within reach (Byrne 2016, 17-20).

Byrne notes that like Aristotle, Saint Paul understands discernment to be the fruit of a sophisticated self-understanding (Byrne 2016, 22), and involves careful distinction between competing truth claims (Byrne 2016, 20). But the important difference is that Paul understands discernment as a gift of the Holy Spirit that enables the followers of Christ to act according to the will of God (Byrne 2016, 21, citing Romans 12:2 and 5:5). And while Ignatius of Loyola draws significantly from Paul, he nevertheless takes a position similar to that of Aristotle about human beings being susceptible to erroneous notions about what will make them happy (Byrne 2016, 24).[22] Elsewhere, Aristotle will compare human beings to "warped pieces of lumber," who must be straightened out by dragging themselves to pursue virtues which curb their vicious tendencies (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1109b2). Echoing

[22] He cites *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a17-18 and 1095b15-35.

this idea, Ignatius describes his spiritual exercises as aiming at the purpose of helping persons to make decisions that are not rooted in disordered attachments or desires (Ignatius 1991, section 21).

Ignatius, like Saint Paul, develops an approach to discernment rooted in a Christian theology of sin, *hamartia* (Gupta & Goodrich, 2020)[23]. There is, of course, a long development of the doctrine of sin in the Christian theological tradition beyond the scope of this paper. I will note, however, that one important element of that tradition, the doctrine of original sin, has been described by several 20th century thinkers as an "empirically verifiable" Christian doctrine (Finstuen 2009). Human beings often desire in disordered ways that do not conduce toward their flourishing. Only God's grace can heal the effects of sin (Burns 2018), but the development of ascetical practices in the Church, and the particular form of them we find in Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, aimed at cultivating a fundamental receptivity to the work of grace, unhindered by disordered desires that might otherwise put up obstacles to grace (Muldoon 2005).

Discernment is the cultivated practice of self-appropriation. A person comes to know the contours of one's inner life in all its facets, to grasp that, in the words of Robert Doran,

> "in fact this world is intelligible, things do hold together, we can make sense of the universe and of our lives, we can overcome the fragmentation of knowledge, we can make true judgments, we can make good decisions, we can transcend ourselves to what is and to what is good." (Doran 2008; Byrne 2016, 29)

Discernment thus unfolds within the broader context of a dynamic world. Unlike the Cartesian *res cogitans* removed from the unclear and indistinct world "out there," the discerning person rooted in practices that conduce toward self-appropriation is fully immersed in the flow of experience of self, others, and environment. Such a person is open to whatever might emerge in one's consciousness of the world, from

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[23] The word *hamartia* is used 175 times in the New Testament, and Paul deploys it 48 times in the book of Romans alone (*e.g.* 5:12-13): "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—for sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law" (New Revised Standard Version).

within consciousness itself (in the form of insight, imagination, memory, desire, or other inner movements); from external stimuli mediated through the senses; or from "elsewhere" (Marion 2024; Tóth 2021). The person practicing discernment has a double intentionality toward all reality. The person exercises a refined attention to ordinary experience even as he attends to the way that attention affects him. He attends further to departures from ordinary experience and the ways those departures impact him at rational, affective, and spiritual levels. As a consequence of the practice of that refined attention, the person is therefore attuned to the possibility of unique experiences from "elsewhere," perhaps even from God.

Conclusion: Self-appropriation and Christian Community

The love of wisdom in Greek antiquity gave rise to a number of movements, or schools, comprised of friends who sought to live the good life through disciplined spiritual practice. They developed doctrines oriented to cultivating virtues, but also complex, multifaceted systems of thought which probed questions of physics, logic, epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and politics. Spiritual practice was integrated into a life dedicated to philosophy.

Many of the earliest Christian writers conceived of themselves as philosophers and their doctrines as philosophy[24]. They similarly developed spiritual practices, drawing from the traditions of *askesis* and *melete* in antiquity (Hadot 1995, 128). Their schools also developed methods of interpretation of classic texts (many of which eventually coalesced into what we call the New Testament), as well as doctrines about God, the person of Christ, the nature of the Church and its mission, and ethics.

These Greek and Christian spiritual traditions were predicated on a conviction that philosophy was oriented toward the development of

[24] "The identification of Christianity with true philosophy inspired many aspects of the teaching of Origen, and it remained influential throughout the Origenist tradition, especially among the Cappadocian Fathers: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa. It is also in evidence in John Chrysostom. All these authors speak of 'our philosophy'; of the 'complete philosophy'; or of "the philosophy according to Christ" (Hadot 1995, 129).

the self and the community of persons within an intelligible order of the cosmos. I suggest, following Lonergan, that this orientation begins in self-appropriation as first philosophy, undertaken through practices of discernment. The primary exercise of discernment is reflection on infinite desire, which opens one to the ongoing construction of an authentic self, and to the possibility of God.

Lonergan, likely following Heidegger and Jaspers, names the unfolding self *Existenz* (Lonergan 1988b; Heidegger 2010; Jaspers 1971). He describes this "becoming aware" (*Besinnung*)[25] as a "heightening of one's self-appropriation," possible because all human beings have a common "ultimate point of reference which is God" (Lonergan 1988b, 222). All human beings are subjects; they have spontaneous capacities to dream, to be conscious, to engage in a process of becoming. A person is "the free and responsible subject producing the first and only edition of himself" (Lonergan 2016, 72).

But the person does not exist in isolation. While self-appropriation unfolds through a person's double intentionality, much of that process will take place as the person engages in the life of a community of persons. Community is, in Lonergan's view, an "achievement of common meaning," the result of subjects whose shared insights conduce toward ever-greater goods of order and schemes of recurrence which nourish entire populations (Lonergan 1988b, 226).

Communities can grow and thrive, but they are also subject to decline and even death. If authenticity is the fruit of self-appropriation in the individual subject, then growth is the fruit of the community of authentic subjects. Conversely, to the extent that subjects become blinded by biases and errors of judgment, they develop unauthenticity and the communities comprised by such subjects will fall into patterns of decline (Lonergan 1988b, 227). Philosophical schools and religious traditions are both marked by this process of progress and decline, meaning that participation in such communities is not in itself a sufficient condition for self-appropriation or authentic discernment.

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[25] Cf. Heidegger 2012, §16, describing *Besinnung* as knowledge that does not seek to be useful and arises from reflection or mindfulness.

What is necessary is engagement in the spiritual practices of a community not only in substance, but also as self-transcending subject. Lonergan describes the substance of Christian practice as being in Christ Jesus: being in love with God without an awareness of being in love with God. But as subject, the Christian becomes aware of being in relationship with God (Lonergan 1988b, 230-1).[26] What might begin as an openness to a revelation "from elsewhere" is now experienced as the entelechy of one's process of self-appropriation. Even in the context of a community's decline, self-transcending subjects can discern anew the meaning and mission of the imitation of Christ: Saint Francis of Assisi can rebuild the Church, or a Teresa of Ávila can reform her religious community.

Self-appropriation thus emerges not only as the recipe for authenticity, but also the prerequisite for healing the community of practice and perhaps the larger human community (Dunne 1985). Lonergan writes,

> "As human authenticity promotes progress and human unauthenticity generates decline, so Christian authenticity – which is a love of others that does not shrink from self-sacrifice and suffering – is the sovereign means for overcoming evil." (Lonergan 2017, 272)

Christian authenticity, and Christian community, are built on spiritual practices oriented toward love of others. Their specific form, according to Lonergan, are in the cultivation of a "dialectical attitude," a willingness to return good in the face of evil (Lonergan 1992, 721)[27]. Such an attitude is hardly spontaneous, if the biases and violence which characterize so much of human history are taken seriously. Rather, the dialectical attitude emerges either through uncritical imitation – as is the case of those who engage in the mimetic behavior proper to sustained practice within religious community – or through self-appropriation and discernment of desires that lead a person to follow Christ in a critical, sustained way[28].

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[26] Distinguishing being in Christ as subject, he writes, "But inasmuch as being in Christ Jesus is the being of subject, the hand of the Lord ceases to be hidden."

[27] Lonergan often draws from Romans 12:21 throughout his works: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (New Revised Standard Version).

[28] I have in mind in the latter case Saint Ignatius of Loyola, in whose Autobiography is the story of the movement from uncritical mimesis of Medieval knight-errant stories to critical imitation of Christ. The movement toward critical mimesis forms the heart

The latter case is, I argue, a form of philosophical practice, oriented both toward the transformation of the self, but also the transformation of society and the well-being of cities.

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