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# PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION AS A WAY OF LIFE: ASKESIS AND ETHICS

DEBORAH CASEWELL   
*University of Bonn*

Philosophy as a way of life has been undergoing a revival in recent years. This essay explores how the central idea of the spiritual exercises can be used to develop an account of philosophy of religion as a way of life. It details some of the contemporary uses and trajectories of philosophy as a way of life. Through engaging the religiously inflected philosophies of Karl Jaspers and Simone Weil, this paper argues that their thought can present an account of philosophy of religion as a way of life that is both ethically and transcendently oriented.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years there have been several surges of interest in the idea of philosophy as a way of life. This understanding of philosophy as a practice is often contrasted with philosophy as a purely cerebral or discursive activity. These discussions take their bearings from the work of Pierre Hadot on Graeco-Roman philosophy, where he argues that philosophical activity was a form of spiritual exercise: an *askesis*. His work is often read and contrasted with Michel Foucault's retrieval of *askesis* in Graeco-Roman culture as the care of the self. In the aforementioned foundational texts, and in the discussions in recent philosophical work that they have sparked, the analysis and use of religion in relation to this *askesis* is often ambivalent. At times it is seen as that which stymied or brought down the Stoic spiritual exercises, or religion itself is excluded from philosophy as a way of life.

Although there has been work that contests the negative portrayal of religion in relation to philosophy as way of life, this article explores an alternative approach. It explores whether, and how, philosophy of religion could be a way of life, and whether approaching the topic from this angle can resolve some concerns that have arisen in relation to this topic. In doing so, this article will explore how philosophy of religion as a way of life would be differentiated from philosophical or theological visions. It will argue that as a discipline, philosophy of religion can mediate between the tendency towards open-ended inquiry in philosophy by providing particular foci to the exercise of philosophy, and the tendency in theology to work within certain doctrinal limits. Having explored how there can be a distinctive understanding of philosophy of religion of a way of life, the article will then explore the ethical vision that philosophy of religion as a way of life offers, and how that differs positively from those detailed in philosophy as a way of life.

## 2. PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE: PAST AND PRESENT DEBATES

In providing an overview of the developments in this area, the scene will be set for how an account of philosophy of religion as a way of life makes a distinctive contribution in how it

opens up possibilities foreclosed by prior approaches. Key amongst these is the work of Pierre Hadot, whose work emphasised the importance of spiritual exercises in Graeco-Roman philosophy. It is those in particular that made philosophy distinctive as a way of life: they were an *askesis* that trained the *psyche* into a particular state. These voluntary, personal exercises sought to transform the individual and were ‘designed to ensure spiritual progress toward the ideal state of wisdom...analogous to the athlete’s training’.<sup>1</sup> Often they involved forms of meditation, usually on one’s death, with Hadot noting not only Socrates’s comment in the *Phaedo* that ‘those who practice philosophy in the right way are in training for dying and they fear death least of all men’,<sup>2</sup> but also Montaigne’s comment that to philosophise is to learn how to die. Therefore Hadot included aspects of existentialism in philosophy as a way of life, for example seeing Heidegger’s emphasis on being-towards-death as in the same spirit.

As the aim of these spiritual exercises is to transform the whole self, through them we put our entire selves in question. We are to die to our ‘*individuality and passions*, in order to look at things from the perspective of universality and objectivity’.<sup>3</sup> This self-controlled state is that of attention (*prosoche*). It is reached through the effort of the will and through meditation as a rational exercise. The philosopher is thus the person who is able to respond appropriately in various situations. In Hadot’s scheme, ethics are not the subject of discourse or programmatic but instead a particular state. They stem not from moral mandates but from our position as a universalised subject.<sup>4</sup> We are to attain a ‘certain way of being human, of living according to reason, within the cosmos and along with other human beings’, where the objects of our efforts are ‘not merely ethics, but the human being as a whole’.<sup>5</sup>

Although Hadot sees that aspects of philosophy as a way of life persisted in Christianity, they took on ‘a new meaning by virtue of the specific character of Christian spirituality, inspired as it is by the death of Christ and the Trinitarian life of the divine Persons’.<sup>6</sup> The ends of the spiritual exercises were relocated, and the state of attention shifted as well, the attitude now ‘relocates man within his genuine being...it is thus the equivalent to the continuous exercise of the presence of God’.<sup>7</sup> Hadot sees that the real loss of philosophy as a way of life occurred in scholasticism, and it was ‘not until Nietzsche, Bergson, and existentialism’ that philosophy consciously returned ‘to being a concrete attitude, a way of life and of seeing the world’.<sup>8</sup> Yet the damage persisted, and in doing philosophy today Hadot sees that we have ‘forgotten *how* to read; how to pause, liberate ourselves from our worries, return into ourselves, and leave aside our search for subtlety and originality, in order to mediate calmly, ruminate, and let the texts speak to us. This, too, is a spiritual exercise, and one of the most difficult’.<sup>9</sup>

Hadot noted his colleague Michel Foucault’s work in this area, and certainly appreciated aspects of his retrieval even whilst criticising the goal of it. Foucault focuses on *askesis* as the care of the self, the ‘mode in which individual freedom—or civic liberty, up to a point—was reflected as an ethics’. He saw that care of the self permeated moral reflection, and yet ‘starting at a certain point, being concerned with oneself was readily denounced as a form of self-love, a form of selfishness or self-interest in contradiction with the interest to be shown in others or the self-sacrifice required’.<sup>10</sup> This tendency stands contrary to Greek and Roman thought, where ‘the care of the self cannot in itself tend toward so exaggerated a form of self-love as to neglect others or, worse still, to abuse one’s power over them’.<sup>11</sup> Although he does not lay the blame entirely at the door of Christianity, he notes that in Christian asceticism the goal is less care of the self and more renunciation of the self.<sup>12</sup> He finds this stress in Gregory of Nyssa’s treatise *On Virginity*, where asceticism is the practice of renunciation, particularly of all earthly attachments. Furthermore, through the self-examination (*exagoreusis*) that this *askesis* entails, he sees that Christianity moves away from self-mastery to truth-seeking. This move then paradoxically links self-determination to self-renunciation, through obedience then renunciation of

the will. The work involved in seeing and speaking of the true self thus becomes an exercise in mortification, in dying.<sup>13</sup> Therefore Christian asceticism marks a shift in this account of the self, coupling an indefinite enforcement on the interiority of the soul with an external, permanent obligation where one addresses the other but the search for the truth of the self involves dying to the self.<sup>14</sup>

However, Hadot criticises Foucault's retrieval for focusing on 'a specific conception of the self':<sup>15</sup> on the development of individuality rather than universality. Foucault's stance results in an ethics of dandyism, where 'by focusing his interpretation too exclusively on the culture of the self, the care of the self, and conversion towards the self—more generally, by defining his ethical model as an aesthetics of existence—M. Foucault is propounding a culture of the self which is *too aesthetic*'.<sup>16</sup> Hadot, in contrast, sees the spiritual exercises as an *askesis* of attention rather than self-cultivation. That is the goal of the continuous work on the self: to cultivate a self of universality and objectivity, through rational reflection and exercises, the exercise of pure thought. Akin to the Platonic ladder, the exercises, subject as they are to reason, turn 'the soul away from the sensible world', allowing it 'to convert itself toward the Good'.<sup>17</sup>

Thus philosophy as a way of life must, at least in the Hadotian sense, seek a particular, non-individualistic end: in his case, the state of attention. However, in recent retrievals of philosophy as a way of life, both the ends and means of philosophy as a way of life are different.<sup>18</sup> In one account, it could be the means by which divisions in philosophy can be overcome, enabling a way of philosophising that reaches beyond the 'usual two-pronged division of philosophy into Analytic and Continental' and which 'may provide indications of a third way as an alternative to them both'.<sup>19</sup> It is, *per* Chase, through being not purely discursive nor sceptical and relativistic that it is able to uphold 'the values of social concern and action in defense of justice, as well as the importance of transcending our limited, individualistic viewpoint in the direction of universality'.<sup>20</sup> It can save philosophy from ignominy, for 'if philosophy neglects these questions, out of some desire to ape what it wrongly thinks to be the methods of the "hard sciences," it will abandon its proper field to the hucksters and mass marketers, facile esotericists, and obscurantists'.<sup>21</sup>

This moves it more towards what Hadot eschews: particular ethical mandates and programmes rather than the universalised, objective ethical subject. Other approaches have queried the designation of the spiritual exercises as philosophical. John Cooper's recent engagement with philosophy as ways of life emphasises the rationality rather than the practicality of philosophy as a way of life. Cooper's work underscores the rationality that philosophy seeks, arguing that 'one must take with utmost seriousness that what the ancient philosophers, following Socrates's innovative lead, are proposing is that we live our lives through some set of argued through, rationally worked out, rationally grasped, and rationally defended, reasoned ideas about the world and one's own place in it'.<sup>22</sup> Cooper thus queries Hadot's use of the spiritual exercises, which he sees as too dependent on a sympathy with Ignatian spirituality. Spiritual exercises are not rational: they are instead rooted in a religious way of life, which is based on sacred texts, traditions, and 'validation through an intense personal feeling'.<sup>23</sup> The spiritual exercises of Hadot, the 'self-exhortation, memorization, and recitation to oneself of bits of sacred text' could have had 'at most a secondary and very derivative function in the philosophical life'.<sup>24</sup> As concerns Christianity, their spiritual exercises were never philosophical ways of life, as they were grounded in the scriptures, not in 'in philosophy, or rather, in reason (philosophical, argumentative, analytical, deductive reason) itself'.<sup>25</sup>

Although this distinction between the religious and the philosophical and its attendant dismissal of the spiritual exercises should be contested,<sup>26</sup> there is a comment by Cooper that is of particular interest going forward. He writes that

long before this conception began to show itself, the earlier ancient philosophers had well-developed conceptions of individual persons, with ‘selves’ as the object of their fundamental and regulatory practical concern. The way of life of philosophy for these earlier, as well as all later, ancient philosophies was a life for individuals, conceiving themselves as such, and seeking the best life possible for themselves individually, as embedded in a rich and full physical and social life.<sup>27</sup>

This enshrining of the individual is of importance. Hadot also stresses the individual, personal nature of philosophy as a way of life. Hadot’s ends are ethical, whereas Cooper is more concerned with developing a rational subject, as is Nussbaum, who stresses philosophy as the rational search for intellectual coherence and truth, which results in an independent, self-mastered self.<sup>28</sup> Done properly, the pursuit of philosophy is the pursuit of a certain kind of life, a steersman for a life ruled by reason rather than emotion. Although it may be impossible to retrieve and relive it today, at the very least, the impulse to ‘study the inner world and its relationship to social conditions’ is a decent start.<sup>29</sup>

This engagement with our current social conditions is also a concern of Sellars, who stresses rationality as the end of philosophy as a way of life. He sees that its appeal is in how it is ‘not only how philosophy was once conceived long ago, but also a live meta-philosophical option that has been taken up by philosophers throughout the history of philosophy and can still be taken up today’.<sup>30</sup> His analysis identifies two particular strands: the Socratic account that ‘philosophy is an activity directed at trying to figure out how to live well, subjecting our current way of life to examination’,<sup>31</sup> and the Aristotelian ideal of the contemplative life, focused on understanding, which is best ‘not because it is identified with living well but because it devotes itself to the highest form of knowledge there is’.<sup>32</sup> This distinction persists, such that ‘it seems not unreasonable to suggest that continental philosophers are the heirs of Socrates while analytic philosophers are heirs to Aristotle’.<sup>33</sup> Sellars again seeks to discover a different way and holds to an understanding, via Lucretius, of philosophy as purgative, a method through which to overcome false ideas.<sup>34</sup> Attempting to bridge the divide drawn up between the search for truth and self-transformation, he comments that ‘perhaps it does not matter so much whether we start out in the pursuit of truth or with a desire for a transformed life, for if we do our philosophy well we shall always end up with both’.<sup>35</sup>

Within philosophy, discussion of how philosophy as a way of life is to be of use tends towards either closer readings or further applications of the phenomenon.<sup>36</sup> As with any philosophical movement that engages, as Hadot does, with the existential, it runs the risk of plunging us ‘into the midst of the paradox of Kierkegaardian-Sartrean fundamental option or criterion constituting “choice”’.<sup>37</sup> Yet this existential inclination is of interest, and is pertinent to the focus on the individual in philosophy as a way of life. In Hadot’s account, philosophy as a way of life is understood as self-formation, cultivation, and universalisation. Ethics thus becomes a matter of cultivating that kind of self, one which is able to respond appropriately in any given situation because it has prepared itself through self-mastery and control of the passions. The self is held in an attentive state: an actively maintained passivity where the attention is focused inward. We are left with the individual in this scheme, as we can only really work on ourselves. It is this which troubles aspects of the call to return to

philosophy as a way of life. It involves a particular presentation of the self and its relationships to others, and it promotes largely an individualistic *askesis* and ethics. This inwardness and individuality develop an ethical stance that is primarily concerned with how the self can attend to the self, rather than to another. It is out of this concern that I will argue that philosophy of religion as a way of life can provide not only a more positive account of ethical self-formation, but provide different ends to aid that task

### 3. PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION AS A WAY OF LIFE: POSSIBILITIES AND PERILS

As noted earlier, the relation of religion to philosophy as a way of life has often been negatively construed. Either the spiritual exercises themselves are too irrational, and philosophy is to purge oneself of superstition, or 'religio', as Sellars notes in Lucretius, or self-renunciation and passivity before God is seen as an inappropriate end, philosophically. The ends of philosophy as a way of life are to be self-constituting and allow for self-mastery, whereas the ends of religious ways of life and spiritual exercises are ultimately self-destructive. In philosophy as a way of life, you build up and develop the self for its own sake, whereas theologically, or religiously, the end is union with God.

Although there is work that responds to these formulations and criticisms,<sup>38</sup> my concern here is to argue for a position distinct from either re-emphasising the religious nature of *askesis* or contesting the distinction between philosophy and theology. It is to argue that there can be a stance that pertains particularly to philosophy of religion. This stance will draw from other recent understandings of how philosophy of religion can be a way of life, chiefly the work of John Cottingham and Philip Goodchild. Cottingham explores this with particular concern for the practical element of the spiritual exercises, whereas Goodchild develops a particular stance towards the world. Using their frameworks, I will then use the work of Karl Jaspers and Simone Weil to point towards a distinctive understanding of philosophy of religion as a way of life.

Cottingham argues that the holistic aspect of the spiritual exercises and the primacy of praxis can counter the naturalistic turn in analytic philosophy. He sees that philosophy of religion engages with the whole of human experience, and can thus offer new philosophical possibilities: ones that are attentive to humanity's particular *mélange* of rationality and non-rationality.<sup>39</sup> The spiritual exercises in particular open up new horizons, not least as they are not explicitly tied to religiosity. As such they do not provoke 'the kind of immediately polarised reaction one finds in the case of religion'.<sup>40</sup> Yet the spiritual exercises, whether of Ignatius, Descartes, or Hadot, and their process of internal transformation rather than discursive reasoning are 'fundamental to understanding not just the nature of spirituality, but also that of religion in general'.<sup>41</sup> The spiritual exercises can be used to develop an account of knowledge that connects with the emotional knowledge explored by Nussbaum in relation to literature. For her, a literary text 'enlists in us a trusting and loving activity', where we 'allow ourselves to be touched by the text'.<sup>42</sup> Picking up on the act of reading as an attentiveness, *askesis* can illumine the truth claims of religion. These truths are thus 'made manifest not via impartial interrogation of the data but through an inner transformation of the subject'.<sup>43</sup>

The combination of the breadth of subjects enveloped into philosophy of religion and the holistic nature of the spiritual exercises can overcome a self that has been bifurcated into rational and emotional. The spiritual exercises help us reach towards a lost integrity of rationality and emotion, and further, 'if the message of faith is true, begin to learn how to be grafted onto

the true vine that is the image of the best that humanity can become'.<sup>44</sup> Philosophy of religion is thus self-transformative. Instead of a detached epistemology, which hardens the self, the spiritual exercises enable a 'porousness and receptivity that is a necessary condition for certain kinds of evidence to become salient...a training process that facilitates just the kind of interior moral transformation that will generate the required receptivity, as envisaged in the conversion process as traditionally understood'.<sup>45</sup> Cottingham sees this approach as *mathesis* rather than *askesis*, as it needs that educational impetus. Through this, it becomes possible to philosophise about religion such that it is not splintered off from 'the interior transformations that condition the life of the believer'.<sup>46</sup> To engage with philosophy of religion enables the possibility for philosophers to 'see more clearly what is at stake'<sup>47</sup> in human, rather than theoretical, terms.

Cottingham structures his discussions around some of the more renowned dilemmas of philosophy of religion: the meaning of life, the problem of evil and suffering, and questions of morality. Whilst his approach pertains more to analytic philosophy of religion, Burns's recent exploration of continental philosophy of religion draws on Cottingham's call for a more humane philosophy of religion. She argues that 'perhaps what philosophy of religion needs is a hybrid methodology—one which draws on both the reasoning skills of analytical philosophy and the existential emphasis and broader range of tools, some originating in cognate disciplines, of continental philosophy'.<sup>48</sup>

The approach of Goodchild in his call for an engaged philosophy of religion involves a different navigation of the analytic and continental. Taking three classic concerns of philosophy of religion: immanence versus transcendence, meaningless suffering, and the design argument; he explores these in dialogue with thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Simone Weil. Goodchild sees that from these particular puzzles and experiences, we are left with the human experience as an aporia. There is an excess intelligibility that underscores our limited explanatory power. That then challenges our usual existential move of projection and assertion. Goodchild also uses the spiritual exercises to engage with this experience, and sees that philosophy of religion can be a spiritual exercise, in how it can be 'an experiment where the aim is to discern what is possible, not what is the case, an ordeal where the aim is to produce a transformation, not a conclusion; and a performance, where the aim is to encounter, not expound'.<sup>49</sup>

The aporia we are brought into by the dilemmas and puzzles in philosophy of religion can spark in us an attention that is closer to Simone Weil's than Pierre Hadot's. It is one that enables a way 'of conducting oneself in and through time that is not simply a matter of projection'.<sup>50</sup> The task of thinking, as attentive rather than discursive, is 'nothing more than being finely tuned, attentive to ourselves, to others, to actual experience, and discerning the clash of "inner yearning" without and within that compose moral life'.<sup>51</sup> This is the task of an engaged philosophy of religion.

Goodchild's use of Simone Weil points us not only towards a philosophy of religion as a way of life, but also towards how that stance leads towards an ethics. I intend to take these approaches to philosophy of religion that utilise the spiritual exercises and, using the thought of Simone Weil and Karl Jaspers, explore how they can be used to construct another account of philosophy of religion as a way of life. I have chosen to use these two thinkers as their understanding of philosophy and attention have resonances with a *praxis* that can be described distinctly as philosophy of religion. That *praxis* concerns the ends of aspects of their philosophies: Jaspers details a particular stance in relation to the divine, whereas Weil's understanding of attention, with its focus on God as its ultimate object, has different ends than Hadot's and therefore creates different ethical subject than Hadot.

The use of Jaspers enables my understanding of philosophy of religion as a way of life to connect with the existential aspect of Hadot's philosophy as a way of life. Hadot notes

Heidegger's being-towards-death, but Jaspers's description of philosophical existence is better suited to constructing philosophy of religion as a way of life. In Jaspers, one is called to exist philosophically. However, this is not the vision of existence construed by the philosophers above: instead, for Jaspers, to exist philosophically is to exist in relation to the ever hidden and inaccessible God. Whilst Jaspers is keen to differentiate philosophical existence from religious existence,<sup>52</sup> his understanding of philosophical existence is not, like Heidegger's, *a priori* atheistic, but one that is structured by its relation to God in the movement of transcending.

For Jaspers, to philosophise is to exist in a particular way: it is an activity, a posture towards the world. The individual consciousness exists in situations, in a world-orientation, only conscious in that it is conscious of others. The individual consciousness experiences various inescapable boundary situations (death, suffering, struggle, and guilt), and from these situations faces a choice. That choice is either to transcend or refrain from transcending. We can cement ourselves further in mere existence (*Dasein*) or transcend into Existenz, which 'takes its bearings in the world as consciousness at large and relates, through the world, to transcendence'.<sup>53</sup> We must relate to transcendence, otherwise we remain unhappily in mere existence, for whilst 'I do not exist without the world, I am not myself without transcendence'.<sup>54</sup>

Our response to a boundary situation has to be original, something that must be settled for ourselves. We either 'allow the course of things to decide *about* me—vanishing as myself, since there is no real decision when everything just *happens*' or we 'deal with being originally, as myself, with the feeling that there must be a decision'.<sup>55</sup> As we cannot avoid suffering, struggle, or guilt, and we must die, we cannot escape this decision. By entering with 'open eyes' into these boundary situations we make the leap towards transcendence, and 'live philosophically as Existenz'.<sup>56</sup>

This attitude, and these leaps, must be constantly repeated. Having made the leap, we find no certainty nor are the situations resolved, but through these motions we become ourselves. Life is one of ceaseless motion in a world of inexhaustible possibilities. We are always exercising our freedom, the 'alpha and the omega of existential elucidation'.<sup>57</sup> This restlessness is not anxiety but a continuous posture and activity of individual decisiveness in which we are able to step from 'the emptiness of the rich world' of infinite possibilities into 'the abundance of a world that is poor compared with the other, but becomes real and is sustained by self-being'.<sup>58</sup> This restive existence relates constantly to transcendence, which Jaspers defines as that 'wholly Other that makes it aware of being not by itself alone'.<sup>59</sup> The movement of transcendence is the move to God, but not to a God that grants external certainties, knowledge, or rest.<sup>60</sup> It is a move to a God that must be and ever remain a mystery.

Even though God is hidden, and our transcending is not a proper relation to God, we are drawn to God.<sup>61</sup> God represents for us oneness, freedom, and self-origination, but we cannot think God. Yet 'what we grasp in this failure is *that* there is a deity, not *what* it is'.<sup>62</sup> We relate in the movement of transcendence to God, but a God that is ever hidden and unknowable.<sup>63</sup> It is an impossible, but constant demand, where although 'I shall never know what God is, what makes me sure of him is what I am'.<sup>64</sup> God is perhaps the horizon that enables our true Existenz. It is a horizon that we must continuously exist in relation to. Jaspers's system demands God, existentially and psychologically, but refrains from speaking of the being of God or making judgements about the existence or non-existence of God. Yet God is the end of that movement of transcending, and as such, his thought presents a vision of human existence that emphasises the positive possibilities of human projection and transcendence.

This suspended attitude is philosophical existence, whereas he sees that religious existence involves certainties and solidity. Philosophy and religion both concern themselves with God,

but relate to God in different ways: one is objectivising, the other leaves God as hidden, for God's concealment 'requires the freedom of Existenz as a condition of all truth in time. Existenz attains itself in the darkness of transcendence without receiving objectively certain demands and answers from transcendence'.<sup>65</sup> Both postures are one of faith, but philosophy's faith is not rest or stability but a constant tension between itself and unbelief. There is no absoluteness within the world, nor outside it, and thus his understanding of the religious posture is that it subordinates freedom to a false certainty.

Considering his clear distinction between philosophical and religious existence, it may seem odd that I am bringing Jaspers under the umbrella of philosophy of religion as a way of life. However, it is how he conceives of God and sees God as the ever-elusive horizon of Existenz that enables one aspect of what I envision as a distinctive account of philosophy of religion as a way of life. It allows for a relation to God that accepts but does not objectivise God. No speculation is introduced as regards the figure of God, but it holds on to the figure of God. Despite his differentiation of philosophical and religious existence, Jasper's philosophical understanding of existence is theistically oriented. Therefore, I see that Jaspers allows us a dimension of transcendence, an understanding of the divine as the horizon to which we orient ourselves that is neither purely philosophical nor religious

Another instance of this relationship to transcendence is present in the thought of Simone Weil. Weil's thought can be melded to an extent with Jaspers's through her own development of the posture of attention. Whilst her posture of attention is related to God, it is also one that develops a particular ethical stance. Therefore Jaspers provides us with the particular philosophical stance and relation to transcendence that needs God but leaves God hidden, and Weil's thought will build on that stance ethically. The use of Weil relates to the particular ethical subject that Hadot envisages: the objectivised, universalised subject. This subject has ready to hand the tools to live an ethical life. Hadot's account of the ethical life focuses on building and developing the individual into a rational and unemotional state. Weil's account of attention also works on the individual subject to develop a particular state. However, her ethical vision seeks impersonality and universality in a different manner. It is that which makes a key ethical difference here.

Aspects of Weil's thought are strongly Platonist, and she sees that humanity has a longing for a transcendent God. This longing, present in the human heart, can only be satisfied by an external, transcendent reality: by the 'unique source of all the good that can exist in this world: that is to say, all beauty, all truth, all justice, all legitimacy, all order, and all human behaviour that is mindful of obligations'.<sup>66</sup> A distinctive feature of humanity is that we can turn our attention and love towards this transcendent God. Only through this particular movement and through reaching that particular state can we hold 'every human being without any exception as something sacred to which he is bound to show respect'. It is this, she sees, which is the 'only possible motive for universal respect towards all human beings'.<sup>67</sup>

This impersonal and external ethics is located in the sacred that is present in each person, which protests against the evil done to them.<sup>68</sup> One is able to attend to this cry through an *askesis* that Weil describes most famously in the essay 'Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God'. She draws here on mathematical inquiry, which correlates with Hadot's own observation that 'physics as a spiritual exercise leads the philosopher to give loving consent to the events which have been willed by that Reason which is immanent to the cosmos'.<sup>69</sup> Here, she develops an account of attention, which is linked to prayer and philosophy. This is the 'orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God'.<sup>70</sup> The effort and attention required for school exercises, that rote repetition and effort to understand and absorb information trains us towards the higher attention of prayer.<sup>71</sup> It is a learning

and a discipline that is ‘the greatest of all efforts perhaps, but...a negative effort’.<sup>72</sup> This also develops the ethical stance we are to adopt towards others. The stance of attention is receptive, and ‘only an attention thus directed possesses the faculty, always identical in all cases, of irradiating with light any human being whatsoever’.<sup>73</sup>

The stance that we achieve is an actively maintained passivity: an attention. It ‘consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of’.<sup>74</sup> Thus the state that we develop is one that does not build up the individual, but rather leaves it open to be receptive to *what* the other needs. In detaching from ourselves we are able to attend to the other, rather than to our own particular arsenal of skills. After all, she writes, ‘to desire that a human being should live is to desire that oneself should be limited’.<sup>75</sup> Attention enables us to attend to the other as they are: it starts from them rather than from us. Therefore, whereas Hadot seeks a universal self, Weil aims for an impersonal self. This impersonality that is cultivated focuses more on others in relation to the self rather than on building up the self in relation to others. Another way of putting it would be to say that Hadot’s *askesis* is focused inwards, on equipping the self, rather than developing an outward attentiveness.

Hence Weil’s account of individual effort and individual *askesis* seeks to move beyond the individual.<sup>76</sup> That means that her understanding of attention can provide a different perspective to Hadot’s. Hadot’s self-constitution neglects the importance of receptivity and passivity, which Kotva sees can instead cultivate a spontaneity that is an ‘ability to act without deliberation and as it were straight from the heart: it is love, or desire’.<sup>77</sup> She notes that, in contrast to Weil’s passivity, and with his privileging of a certain understanding of philosophy, Hadot’s critique of the individualist, self-willed subject of Foucault rings hollow. In his own ethical scheme he also ‘affirms this subject and elevates it, and thus ‘the same objection that Hadot raised against Foucault could be raised against Hadot himself’.<sup>78</sup>

Hadot’s restriction of ethics to the individual and his focus on developing a state in relation to the individual themselves, rather than through what transcends them and yet calls to them, is also of concern to Hankey. He argues that by denying transcendence, Hadot’s focus is narrowed. It is this which leads him to see scholasticism as the fall of philosophy as a way of life whereas he argues that Aquinas sublates, rather than destroys it. In Aquinas philosophical *praxis* is also related to the transcendent, and ‘the knowing which philosophy seeks will be perfected in us after this life: our proper human aim and labours are presupposed not destroyed’.<sup>79</sup> There is self-transformation that is not complete renunciation: religion offers ‘a way of life which transforms us towards deformity’.<sup>80</sup> It is a way of life that, like Jaspers and Weil, is open and receptive: one that is directed towards others and towards the divine, one that does not eschew philosophy but incorporates it.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Both Weil and Jaspers’s thought fall into the aporia between philosophy and theology. It is this aporetic, open, philosophical and religious stance that should distinguish philosophy of religion as a way of life. As a way of life, it develops as a particular ethical posture that reflects that openness and receptivity. It is one that understands that there are ends that we turn our thought to, ones that may not be discursive nor concrete and that cannot be doctrinal. Yet they are ends that point towards something that transcends our mere human experiences.

They shape our *askesis*, our training towards them even as they admit their impossibility and inaccessibility. We engage in spiritual exercises, in an *askesis* that works on the self so that it reaches beyond itself to the transcendent. Philosophy of religion allows us to work on ourselves for a particular ethical openness rather than towards a certain readiness. It can take the self and see it as something to be worked on and to be remade, to be ethically open rather than rationally equipped. Weil provides us with the ethical posture, informed as it is by her particular philosophical and religious outworkings, and Jaspers provides us with the orientation.

A final concern. If to philosophise is to learn how to die, what do we learn to do from this philosophising about religion? Perhaps, considering the stresses and directions in which Weil and Jaspers's thought point, to philosophise about religion is to learn how to hope: for that grace which is given, not sought, and for our new existence, whatever form that may take. This particular understanding of hope draws from Jaspers's positive movement of transcendence towards the divine, ever-seeking and ever-finding, alongside Weil's actively maintained passivity that waits on that God. If that state is a self-mastery, it is a self-mastery that seeks to be surprised and disturbed, to not, as Goodchild notes about idealist philosophy, make the world conform to itself. If the guiding principles are hope and receptivity, for the experience of grace and the needs of the other, whatever they may do to the self, then perhaps it expresses a realistic vision of the human condition. It is a vision that does not idolise reason and/or a Stoic detachment, it is one that is emotionally cognisant but not unruly, reaching ever beyond itself.

Finally, it may be the case that philosophy of religion as a way of life gives one an openness, maybe even a mandate, towards transcendence, something which philosophy at times closes itself off to and to which theology or religion may too hastily give a name and a particular programme. It points towards a hope, a transcendence, an openness of the horizon, towards possibility without necessarily tying it down. There is a risk that this sounds ambiguous and agnostic, and perhaps other forms of philosophy of religion are more assertive. However, I would comment that the stance it adopts is less apophatic and more hopeful: a stance that has an optimism, in the face of the world, and especially in the face of ourselves.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 59.
- <sup>2</sup> G.M.A. Grube, *The Trial and Death of Socrates* (London: Hackett, 1984) 59.
- <sup>3</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 95.
- <sup>4</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 267.
- <sup>5</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 272.
- <sup>6</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 127.
- <sup>7</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 132.
- <sup>8</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 108.
- <sup>9</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 127.
- <sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom' in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, (New York: New Press, 1997), 281-301, 284.
- <sup>11</sup> Foucault, 'The Ethics of Concern', 288.
- <sup>12</sup> Foucault, 'The Ethics of Concern', 285.
- <sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'histoire de la sexualité: les aveux de la chair* (Paris: Gallimard, 2018), 145.
- <sup>14</sup> Foucault, *Les aveux de la chair*, 145.
- <sup>15</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 207.
- <sup>16</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 211.
- <sup>17</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 93.

<sup>18</sup> Martha Nussbaum discusses philosophy as therapeutic: a healer of ‘human diseases, produced by false beliefs’ and as such ‘the soul’s art of life’ (*The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994], 14). Whilst she links this medicinal work to human flourishing, I think there are differences between this role and philosophy as a way of life.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Chase, ‘Observations on Pierre Hadot’s Conception of Philosophy as a Way of Life’ in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancients and Moderns: Essays in Honor of Pierre Hadot*, eds. Michael Chase, Stephen R. L. Clark, Michael McGhee (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 262–286, 280.

<sup>20</sup> Chase, ‘Observations’, 283.

<sup>21</sup> Chase, ‘Observations’, 283.

<sup>22</sup> John M. Cooper, *Pursuits of wisdom: Six ways of life in ancient philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>23</sup> Cooper, *Pursuits of wisdom*, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Cooper, *Pursuits of wisdom*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Cooper, *Pursuits of wisdom*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> His dismissal of the spiritual exercises is combatted by Cohoe and Grimm, who argue that rather than not being based on reason, ‘spiritual exercises do not guarantee, but they help reason to secure, a life lived in accord with one’s value judgements’ (C.M. Cohoe and S.R. Grimm, ‘What is philosophy as a way of life? Why philosophy as a way of life?’, *European Journal of Philosophy* 29, no. 1 (2021): 236–251, 249). Daniel de Nido argues that the ‘focus on the self and its cultivation has in turn opened avenues for placing systems of religious ethics within their proper practical contexts’ as ‘a project that works upon people as they exist by nature or spontaneously through techniques that change their behavioral, cognitive, and affective tendencies and thereby bring about an ideal or at least improved state of selfhood’ (Daniel de Nido, ‘Pierre Hadot on Habit, Reason, and Spiritual Exercises’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 1 (2018): 7–36, 8). He sees that the spiritual exercises prevent ethics from becoming mere habit in how they ‘cultivate recognition of ourselves as mortal and morally responsible individuals capable of making choices for ourselves. Second, they demonstrate to us that our true self lies in our capacity for reason and in the enactment of this form of selfhood in our everyday lives’ (de Nido, 10). Thus ‘far from being distractions from the cultivation of reason, spiritual exercises are necessary to shape our moral intention and inner logos that give rise to action’ (de Nido, 16). His own attention to spiritual exercises as a discipline, rather than a habit allows, for him, a more holistic understanding of human nature, as ‘spiritual exercises use emotion, rhetoric, and imagination to highlight the source of our ignorance in habit and passion and to indicate how they can be overcome. In this way, spiritual exercises bridge the gap between our conscious and automatic conduct and give us the capability to integrate the two’ (de Nido 28).

<sup>27</sup> Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 12.

<sup>30</sup> John Sellars, ‘What is Philosophy as a Way of Life?’, *Parrhesia* 28 (2017): 40–56, 41.

<sup>31</sup> Sellars, ‘What is Philosophy as a Way of Life?’, 42.

<sup>32</sup> Sellars, ‘What is Philosophy as a Way of Life?’, 44.

<sup>33</sup> Sellars, ‘What is Philosophy as a Way of Life?’, 45.

<sup>34</sup> Sellars, ‘What is Philosophy as a Way of Life?’, 52.

<sup>35</sup> Sellars, ‘What is Philosophy as a Way of Life?’, 53.

<sup>36</sup> The above section has explored the former approach, and the work currently being published by Keith Ansell-Pearson, Matthew Sharpe, and Michael Ure tends towards this as well. They have worked on re-reading philosophers, emphasising how their thought details philosophy as a way of life, and providing excellent accounts of the phenomena. Other approaches seek to make it more readily applicable to everyday life. This approach is best illustrated in a 2020 special issue of *Metaphilosophy*, where Sommariva sees it as more self-examination than *askesis*, and Hidalgo argues for the social, cognitive, and behavioural benefits of philosophy as a way of life.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Flynn, ‘Philosophy as way of Life: Foucault and Hadot’, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 31, no. 5–6 (2005): 609–622, 619.

<sup>38</sup> See in particular the argument made by John Milbank in ‘Intensities’, *Modern Theology* 15, no. 4 (1999): 445–497.

<sup>39</sup> Cottingham writes that philosophy of religion ‘embraces practical moral questions (about how we should live our lives), as well as more theoretical moral issues about the objectivity of morality and the source of moral value; it takes us into the philosophy of mind—questions about the nature of the self and consciousness, and the extent to which we are ultimately responsible for our character and actions; and it

delves into cosmological questions about the ultimate source of our world and of human existence. But perhaps most strikingly, it is concerned with our overall view of the nature of reality' (John Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion: towards a more humane approach* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press], 1). This expands on his comments in the *The Spiritual Dimension* that 'religious thought and experience, though it partly connects with the realm of science, has very significant affinities with this other, more personal domain. So if it is not simply to ignore religion entirely, and not just religion but all these other vital areas of human experience, it seems crucial that philosophy should maintain the resources to explore the domain in question' (*The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], viii).

<sup>40</sup> Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, 5.

<sup>42</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 282.

<sup>43</sup> Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, 139.

<sup>44</sup> Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, 172.

<sup>45</sup> Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 169-70.

<sup>46</sup> Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 176.

<sup>47</sup> Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 176.

<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Burns, *Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 66.

<sup>49</sup> Philip Goodchild, 'Engaged Philosophy of Religion', *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* 12, no. 2 (2012): 52-68, 58.

<sup>50</sup> Goodchild, 'Engaged Philosophy of Religion', 63.

<sup>51</sup> Goodchild, 'Engaged Philosophy of Religion', 68.

<sup>52</sup> Jaspers is critical of religious postures of obedience and of mystical union, which removes the person from the world: 'As an independent being in the world, I can seek God. The mystic will receive a direct answer, it comes in the extinction of his search as he steps out of time. The believer's only answer comes out of the world. It is the answer he must give himself by listening to the realities of worldly existence and of his own actions' (Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy vol.1*, trans. E. B. Ashton [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969], 74).

<sup>53</sup> Jaspers, *Philosophy I*, 89.

<sup>54</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy vol.2*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 45.

We cannot not make a decision, because the world and the individual existence cannot 'become one, and they cannot separate either' (5).

<sup>55</sup> Jaspers, *Philosophy II*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Jaspers, *Philosophy II*, 182.

<sup>57</sup> Jaspers, *Philosophy II*, 155.

<sup>58</sup> Jaspers, *Philosophy II*, 161.

<sup>59</sup> Jaspers, *Philosophy II*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> Existenz is inconclusive, and this is 'the touchstone of any philosophy of Existenz' (Jaspers, *Philosophy I*, 67).

<sup>61</sup> 'God is hidden, that his very concealment requires the freedom of Existenz as a condition of all truth in time. True Existenz attains itself in the darkness of transcendence without receiving objectively certain demands and answers from transcendence' (Jaspers, *Philosophy II*, 280).

<sup>62</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy vol.3*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 35.

<sup>63</sup> In this sense Jaspers is perhaps being more religious in his posture than he may like to admit, considering the sense in which his vision of existence fits with a tradition in apophatic theology. However, this merely underscores why he is a suitable candidate for advancing philosophy of religion as a way of life. A particular concern of philosophy of religion is religious language and how to speak of God, and Jaspers's thought could provide, especially considering his comments on mysticism, an understanding of apophatic language that sets itself against mysticism.

<sup>64</sup> *Karl Jaspers, Philosophy of Existence*, trans. R. F. Grabau (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 108.

<sup>65</sup> Jaspers, *Philosophy II*, 280.

<sup>66</sup> Simone Weil, 'Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations', in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Sian Miles, (London: Penguin, 2005), 222.

<sup>67</sup> Weil, 'Draft', 222.

<sup>68</sup> ‘What is sacred in a human being is that which is, far from the personal, the impersonal. Everything that is impersonal in a human being is sacred, and that alone.’ (Simone Weil, ‘La Personne et la sacré’ in *Simone Weil: Late Philosophical Writings*, ed. E.O. Springsted and trans. E.O., Springsted & L.E. Schmidt (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 107). However, Christopher Hamilton writes that Weil ‘would like all the power and impersonal authority of a metaphysical system even as that system is anchored in, and draws strength from, her own deeply personal sensibility and experiences. But this creates an instability in her work that is clearly simultaneously deeply personal and yet longs to be impersonal’ (‘Simone Weil’s “Human Personality”: Between the Personal and the Impersonal’, *Harvard Theological Review* 98, no. 2 (2005): 187–207, 196). He notes later that ‘she wishes for her own destruction even as she asserts herself against it’ (198).

<sup>69</sup> Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 136.

<sup>70</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, ed. Joseph-Marie Perrin and trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), 57.

<sup>71</sup> ‘If we concentrate our attention on trying to solve a problem of geometry, and if at the end of an hour we are no nearer to doing so than at the beginning, we have nevertheless been making progress each minute of that hour in another more mysterious dimension. Without our knowing or feeling it, this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul (Weil, 57).

<sup>72</sup> Weil, *Waiting on God*, 55.

<sup>73</sup> Weil, *Waiting on God*, 57.

<sup>74</sup> Weil, *Waiting on God*, 62.

<sup>75</sup> Weil, *Waiting on God*, 48.

<sup>76</sup> Weil’s account of decreation certainly tends towards a kind of Stoic detachment, and that understanding is linked up with attention in her thought. However, her attention also moves towards this ethical posture that seeks a distinctive impersonal interpersonality. The detachment is from the self, but that then leads into the ethical posture towards an other.

<sup>77</sup> Simone Kotva, *Effort and Grace: On the Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 155.

<sup>78</sup> Kotva, *Effort and Grace*, 169.

<sup>79</sup> Wayne Hankey, ‘Philosophy as Way of Life for Christians?: Iamblichan and Porphyrian Reflections on Religion, Virtue, and Philosophy in Thomas Aquinas’, *Laval théologique et philosophique* 59, no. 2 (2003): 193–224, 209.

<sup>80</sup> Hankey, ‘Philosophy as Way of Life for Christians?’, 227.