

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

THE POLITICS OF SELF-OVERCOMING:
SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AND POLITICAL LIBERATION
FROM MICHEL FOUCAULT TO MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MARCH 2020

For my grandparents

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Acknowledgements

In some very important sense, this project began while I was an undergraduate at Rutgers University, in Professor John McClure's seminar on Religion and Contemporary Literature during the 2002-2003 academic year. It was there that I first encountered not just the ethics of Michel Foucault, but Pierre Hadot's brief but powerful response to the very idea of "the care of the self," apropos of his own work on ancient spiritual exercises. And it was, if I recall correctly, within the context of that course and those discussions that the question of the political content and consequences of any such form of practice first arose for me. It was also there that I discovered rather quickly that any satisfactory answer to that question would not come without a great deal of effort. So, for that reason, the first person I would like to thank is John McClure, who helped initiate this project in so many ways, saw me through some of the earliest stages of it, and supported my graduate applications—even despite a five year break between leaving Rutgers in 2003 and arriving at Chicago in 2008.

I would also like to thank the two other undergraduate mentors also shaped both the ideas here at their earliest stages and the overall academic trajectory that has led to the completion of this project: Mychel Namphy first introduced me to so many of the radical political figures, activists, and organizers who, I believe, provide the model and the paradigm for the "form of life" that this dissertation works to articulate. I still draw on his "Spiritual-Political Autobiography" syllabus in my teaching and research to this day. Yu Chun-fang supported my work in religious studies, my BA research, and my graduate school applications.

I came to the University of Chicago Divinity School in 2008 to study with Arnold I. Davidson. With Arnold's support over the past 10 years, this project has grown in directions I could not have foreseen. In 2009 we read Michel Foucault's still-untranslated final lectures *La*

courage de la vérité; in 2019, we rounded out the cycle with *Les aveux de la chair*. In between, we've talked a great deal about free improvisation, discussed the Civil Rights Movement, read Levinas, Jankélévitch, and a lot of Foucault, among many, many other things. Arnold has been the best mentor a graduate student could ask for, and in the most fundamental sense, none of this would have been possible without him. The concert I co-organized at the University of Chicago in January of 2019, to coincide with the release of the *Critical Inquiry* volume devoted to his work, was one small attempt on my part to say thank you. The book that will emerge from this dissertation will be another.

I first met Bernard Harcourt for the most honest of reasons: he was giving a talk on what would become *The Illusion of Free Markets* at the University of Chicago Law School many years ago, and there was a free lunch with the talk. I had no idea who he was at the time, I was really just there for the sandwiches. Following that talk, I have been involved in more projects and conversations with Bernard than I can count, but it is perhaps our work on the manuscript translation of Foucault's *Mal-faire, dire-vrai* lectures that stands out the most. While at Chicago, Bernard gathered around him an amazing *équipe* of students, many of whom remain dear friends and important interlocutors. We would meet every few weeks at Bernard's house to workshop someone's chapter, paper, or proposal over dinner and wine. Those evenings were *exactly* the kind of thing one hopes to experience in graduate school, and for that reason and many others, Bernard is exactly the kind of mentor and professor one hopes to have—and some of us, for whatever reason, have been lucky enough to have.

Curtis Evans is one of the most thoughtful, intelligent, and caring people I have ever met. He has supported me and supported this project in ways and to an extent that goes beyond anyone else. If this work is at all successful, and especially if my theoretical gambit here is

successful—the argument that it is the history that completes the philosophy in this work, and not the other way around—it is thanks to Curtis. He has read this draft more times than anyone, given the most detailed feedback both in person and in writing, and has provided irreplaceable support both personally (especially in the past few years) and intellectually. Coming into the body of historical work that this project so depends on, and navigating it with any level of effectiveness, would simply have been impossible without Curtis. He has been there every step of this project, and for that I cannot thank him enough.

Outside of my committee, the following people have mentored and supported me in one way or other: Raoul Moati, gave me the unique opportunity to translate his book *Levinas and the Night of Being*, which has shaped my subsequent work and interests in fundamental ways.

The great Buddhist scholar Steve Collins, who we lost suddenly and far too soon, contributed directly to this dissertation equally through his insights on Pierre Hadot and on Ornette Coleman. As noted in the body of this work below, our conversation at Grounds of Being in 2016 fundamentally shaped crucial aspects of my approach to this material, especially Chapter 1.

I have also been extremely fortunate to meet, talk with, and befriend the great attorney Tom Durkin, who has probably contributed more and more substantively to decency in the world than anyone I've ever met. Tom is the only person I can think of who is likely to show up to a conference on Foucault armed with first-hand experience of prison conditions at Guantanamo Bay. Our conversations over the past many years, since he first started coming to Bernard's classes, have been among the most valuable personal, political, and intellectual encounters of my life.

Finally, I must acknowledge the following people for contributing to my research, pedagogy, and overall experience at Chicago in ways too numerous and varied to detail: Seth Brodsky, Ryan Coyne, Sarah Hammerschlag, Richard Rosengarten, Richard Neer, Dan Brudney, Alireza Doostar, and Jason Bridges.

I also want to thank and acknowledge the people who had my back during at least some phase of this endeavor; people who have supported me at my best and at my worst, and who have shone a lot of light in some of the darkest times over the past ten years. Some of that support has been intellectual, through conversations, reading, editing, and so on; some of it has been personal; and a great deal of it has been both at once. In some way or another this project would simply never have gone anywhere, let alone gotten this far without our conversations, your challenges, insights, and friendship: Olivia W. Block, Davey Tomlinson, Sean Hannan, Jackie Reyes, Zeke Goggin, Dalmar Hussein, Tuomo Tiisalla, Daniel Ricardo Rodriguez Navas, Yuna Blajer de la Garza, Ray Noll, Tyson Leuchter, Samuel Galloway, Dawn Herrera Helphand, Marcus Board Jr., Gilly Nir, Abigail Akavia, Emily Crews, Francey Russell, Maureen Kelley, Agnes Malinowska, Eric Hanss, Claire Bowman, Briel Kobak, Ted Gordon, Hannah Eisler Burnett, Stanton Kidd, Alicia Gurley, Ben Remsen, Daniel Kobza, Joshua Saltzman, Christa Cesario, “Celery” Sam Hopkins, Sydney Conaway, Adam Leeds, Thea Riofrancos, Daniel Denvir, Brian Whitney, Diana Harper, Kareem Rabie, Gabriel Jermaine Vanlandingham-Dunn, Anne Marie Wissman, Adam Stern and Sunny Yudkoff (whose friendship knows no bounds), Hannah Roh, and Greg Chatterley (a true comrade, worthy of the title). Special thanks to Marie McDonough for helping untangle some particularly difficult translation knots in Chapter 2. A decade is a long time, thank you for being part of it in all of the varied, weird, and specific ways

that you have. I owe you all a debt of gratitude that I can only try and articulate here, and which I look forward to reciprocating for a long time.

There is an extremely special place in my heart and in my life for the people who make up the experimental music community in Chicago and beyond. I want to specifically and emphatically thank the Elastic Arts Foundation and the Elastic family, especially Paul Giallorenzo, Dave Rempis, and Samuel Lewis. I would have lost my mind a long time ago without Elastic. I also have to acknowledge the people who have taken the time to make sounds with me, one way or another. In total there are too many to mention, but the following people have done me the profound honor of working closely with me on the projects that have meant the most to me: Ryan Packard, Lia Kohl, Andrew Clinkman, Mark Shippy, Ben Baker Billington, Brian J. Sulpizio, Ben Boye, Ricardo Lagamosino, Nick Broste, Alex Inglizian, Katie Young, Julian Anthony Lynch, Jonathan Lang, Bill Meyer, and everyone at ACRE.

My family have unconditionally supported me in ways too numerous to mention (from meals, to moral support, to card games, to more meals, etc.), even when, I suspect, it was not entirely clear exactly what I was doing this whole time: My father, Paul A. Wyche Jr., I can't thank enough for everything you've taught me (from how to re-shingle a roof to how to build a fire from nothing) and all of the places we would never have gone without you (a freezing mountaintop in January, the home of grandma's family in the *Açores*, and so on). My mother MaryAnn F. Nicosia, who has always encouraged, supported, and been there for me in more ways than I can articulate: you taught me everything from how to cook to how to always be better. Above all you are the ideal model of how to *care* for the people you love. While no one has supported me over the last decade like my mom has, my siblings have come pretty close:

Angela T. Wyche, Jeanette I. Wyche, JuliaRose A. Driscoll, and Scott H. Wyche. You're all the literal best. The support of my brother-in-law Derrick Patterson has been indispensable as well.

My niece Dale Patterson is the best research assistant anybody could ever ask for, especially for a 2-year-old. She was with me when I finished the first draft of this dissertation, and, as soon as it was done, insisted that we get to the important stuff—screaming at the top of our lungs, reading a book, and methodically dumping the contents of my desk onto the floor. Nicola and Lio weren't exactly old enough to help out directly just yet, but they had crucial roles to play in all of this too.

My cousins are too many to list here, but each helped me out, supported me, and made this possible in one way or another: Patrick for (among a million other things) driving cross-country with a car full of stuff with me; Dominic for writing the best songs and the most ridiculous jokes; V.J. for coming to visit, hanging out during the Thundersnow, introducing me to Manny's—you get the idea. Above all however, my cousin and my best friend Michael Nicosia has had my back, unconditionally, my entire life. I have never accomplished anything worth doing without his support, and this one is no different. I wouldn't even know where to begin with a list, so I'll just say thanks for all of it.

Over the last 12 years, I have lost my uncle Michael Nicosia Sr., my uncle Dale Wyche, my grandfather Paul Alton Wyche Sr., my cousin Meagan Wyche, my aunt Mary Jo Wyche, and my uncle Vincent John Nicosia Sr. Each of these losses was and remains too much to bear, and impossible to articulate. I will say this though, and then leave it there: Uncle Ben, that JVC is right next to my desk, and it's not going anywhere.

Above all, this is for my grandparents: Stella Theresa Mello and Paul Alton Wyche Sr., and Jeannette Anne Caridi and Rocco Giorgio Nicosia. No one, ever, accomplishes anything

alone, and for me, everything I've done, including completing this degree, begins with them. Everything they did, every meal cooked, every floor swept, every long, difficult, and *dignified* day at work, allowed me to be here and to do this. You were and still are the center of our worlds.

Introduction: What is the “Spiritual?”

“Some of course have sensed the need to cultivate new spiritual forces in contemporary man, but very few among even those are oriented in the only constructive direction: to search for these new forces *in and through the recognition of the technological progress in question*, through what Karl Jaspers calls a “loyalty” to the realities of the 20th century. Lacking that loyalty, the denunciation of the dangers of technological progress so often devolves into a mythical nostalgia for the past, which in turn leads, as the case may be, to a global rejection of modernity, a negative and desperate attitude, an escape into *spiritualism* or mystical comforts, and religious or secular forms of retreat from the world.”

—Georges Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*¹

“There is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself.”

—Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*²

“As in so many past experiences, our hopes had been blasted, and the shadow of deep disappointment settled upon us. We had no alternative but to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community. Mindful of the difficulties involved, we decided to undertake a process of self-purification. We began a series of workshops on nonviolence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves: ‘Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?’ ‘Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?’”

—Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”³

I. Ethical Practices of Self-overcoming

This dissertation consists in the historical and philosophical development of the political content and consequences of what I refer to as the category of practices of ethical self-overcoming, or what I will at times alternately call self-transformation or self-change. I approach this task through the introduction, critique, and elaboration of four overlapping ethical conceptions, as they are articulated by four twentieth-century thinkers, which comprise (but do not exhaust) this general category. These are the “spiritual exercises” of the classicist Pierre Hadot; Michel Foucault’s ethics of the “care of the self;” what Georges Friedmann, the founder of French sociology of labor, refers to as both “spiritual exercises” and the “interior effort;” and what Martin Luther King Jr. calls the work of ‘self-purification,’ integral to direct action. A

¹ Georges Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 119.

² Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005), 252.

³ Martin Luther King, *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: New American Library, 1964), 88.

future version of this project will also engage the Czech phenomenologist and *Charta 77* signatory Jan Patočka's idea of the "care of the soul,"⁴ and Audre Lorde's famous statement that "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."⁵

I collectively define this class of formulations according to Pierre Hadot's specific understanding of spiritual exercises as "voluntary, personal practices intended to bring about a transformation of the individual, a transformation of the self."⁶ As should be clear, each of these initial criteria require considerable specification, and will be subject to a great deal of elaboration over the course of this project. At the same time, this foundational definition serves well enough for all of the thinkers that we will encounter here, and thus as a starting point for the category under which I have gathered them.

For Hadot, spiritual exercises can refer to an entire range of practices; and like his definition, his examples are representative:

By this term, I mean practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive, as in contemplation, but which were all intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subject who practiced them. The philosophy teacher's discourse could also assume the form of a spiritual exercise, if the discourse were presented in such a way that the disciple, as auditor, reader, or interlocutor, could make spiritual progress and transform himself within.⁷

To this list, we may add any number of exercises, some more clearly philosophical, others recognizably of the order of religious practice:⁸ forms of prayer; chanting, singing, the

⁴ See Jan Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, trans. Peter Lom, Stanford (Stanford University Press 2002).

⁵ Audre Lorde, "A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer," in *A Burst of Light: Essays by Audre Lorde* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988), 131.

⁶ Pierre Hadot et al., *The present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, 2nd ed., Cultural memory in the present (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011), 87.

⁷ Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 6.

⁸ The relationship between "religious practice" and "spiritual exercise" can in no way be taken for granted—certainly not if the latter is to have any long-term value in the analysis of the former. Among my central and overarching goals in this work as a whole is precisely the specification of a set of formal criteria under which such seemingly different forms of practice may be brought together. In order to do so we must begin, as I have said, by

creation of devotional objects, and other kinds of artistic activity; pilgrimage and other practices of travel and physical hardship; and so on. Whatever the practice or regimen of practices however, they must, necessarily, though perhaps not sufficiently, be taken up in order to bring about some kind of transformation, change, or growth within the practicing subject.⁹

But as I have already begun to suggest, neither Hadot's foundational definition, nor this preliminary list of examples can exhaust the kinds of practices of ethical self-change that motivate the group of thinkers in question here, nor the category of practices of self-overcoming on the whole. Indeed, I use the term "category" at this early stage, rather than more simply referring to a singular "concept," because while it is clear that this group of notions can be taken as a kind of conceptual cluster, it is equally clear that the development of each is marked by very precise forms of specification, and are uniquely tied to an entire range of motivations, attending philosophical and historical concepts, questions and concerns. Further, one of the primary goals of this project is to challenge, elaborate, and develop, precisely this category, and thus the concepts and definitions that constitute it. For this reason, Hadot's primary specification and the brief list of examples I have so far provided should simply be understood in terms of preliminary 'working definitions,' the necessary foundation for the critical work that emerges from the category and from those definitions themselves.

drawing out the implicit formal aspects of Hadot's understanding of spiritual exercises. It should suffice, however, to at least provisionally bring certain forms of religious practice within the analytical framework of spiritual exercises, on the condition that they meet the two criteria specified here.

⁹ This idea, that change, or at least *intended* change, are a necessary component of such practices raises interesting questions for formulations outside of Hadot's. I am thinking especially of contemporary formulations of self-care inspired, accurately or not, by Lorde, which prioritize a kind of "sustenance of oneself," rather than outright and long-term transformation. Such forms of self-care are associated more with immediate forms of personal and political crisis: those times and places in which questions of physical and mental health, and indeed of survival, demand attention before all else. Because what I have called practices of sustenance here are responsive to more immediate concerns, they challenge and complement the spiritual exercises that Hadot discusses, the latter being marked as they are by a more long-term spiritual-philosophical *telos*.

It is from this shared, if still ambiguous, point of departure that I elaborate and develop the differing ways in which the individuals noted here understand, theorize, critique, and deploy practices, of whatever kind, taken up in order to bring about some form of ethical, political, religious, or material change in the practicing subject—however that subject itself is understood, for whatever reasons, and to whatever ends.

This work will proceed systematically through four chapter-length treatments of each of the individuals invoked here, in the order that they appear above. Each chapter will introduce one of these figures and their respective conception, and in so doing will raise critical questions not only for that particular writer, but for the category as a whole. In this way, each chapter at once presents a singular focus and builds upon preceding discussions, though in a way that is at times non-linear, as necessitated by the material in question.

I.i. Central Questions.

While I address an entire range of concerns over the course of this project, the overall study is fundamentally motivated by two positive questions, each of which consistently appear in this literature: First, the possibility of undertaking “spiritual exercises” in the present, or, put differently, the possibility of “properly contemporary” practices of the self. Second, the question of the political status, content, and consequences of such ethical practices of self-overcoming; or, more specifically, the ways in which the ethical self-transformation of individuals can and does intersect with collective and systemic political questions and actions. My success here will be in no small part predicated on the need to establish exactly *why* these two persistent questions appear in this body of literature, rather than simply noting *that* it is a feature they share in common.

Further, I argue that these two guiding questions must deal with the negative criterion of what I call the problem of “spiritualism,” or the concern that the very conception of spiritual exercises necessarily amounts to a form of what Foucault calls “egoism” or what Friedmann terms “retreat.” I argue that the possibility that the care of the self can amount to mere self-absorption and therefore the abnegation of political or inter-subjective responsibility is an ever-present danger in all of the conceptions in question and thus to the category as a whole, and would thus preclude the possibility of solving the second problem, that of formulating a genuine politics of self-overcoming. I discuss this problem in greater detail below.

Each of these questions appears in one form or another in each of the thinkers that I engage here, even as that concern is not always explicit. I argue further that these three questions are intimately bound up with one another, and I thus develop that relationship and the specific constellation of problems that arise from it, over the course of this project. More precisely, it is only through an engagement with one body of literature that the ways in which given questions do indeed matter for another can be brought to light. The formal structure of this project is meant to facilitate those mutual relationships of challenge and illumination as effectively as possible.

I.i.a. Spiritual Exercises in the Present.

Hadot, Friedmann, Foucault, and King are each, very much in their own way, explicitly concerned with the possibility of engaging in exercises of self-overcoming under present historical, political, material, and religious circumstances. Each chapter will engage the ways in which this question arises within the work of the figure in question, and will describe not just why it does in the differing ways that it does, but its importance in the given form that it takes for both a given conception and category as a whole.

This theme is not simply relevant because it is something that each of these figures have in common. Nor, I argue, is it simply incidental to their respective historical and philosophical undertakings. In the case of King, this is as clear as possible, as his philosophical-theological reflections on self-purification and direct action are inextricably embedded in the work of large-scale organizing and mass politics. Similarly, Friedmann's interest in the "interior effort" and the work of resituating the "spiritual dimension" within the work of revolutionary material transformation is in no small part rooted in his extremely early grasp of the failure of the Soviet project and his goal of bringing about "socialism with a human face."¹⁰ Similar political and ethical motivations can be found in Hadot and Foucault.

Further still however, in my engagement with Pierre Hadot in Chapter 1, I demonstrate that the question of contemporary practices of the self also goes beyond the various concerns which initially motivate a given thinker's interest in this category. Through an analysis of the overlap between what I refer to as Hadot's prescriptive and descriptive project, I argue that the question of contemporary spiritual exercises in fact reduces to the problem of understanding the emergence of new forms of practice in general, the relationships between the varying practical and theoretical aspects that constitute them, and the overall relationship of what Foucault calls a given "morality" to "the reality in which it is situated."¹¹ That in turn, with Hadot's help, leads to the specification of the formal criteria necessary for any attempt to translate or adapt ancient

¹⁰ Friedmann often references this phrase, most famously associated with the Czechoslovakian Communist Party of Dubček and the events leading up to the Prague Spring of 1968, and later to the *Charta 77* movement in which Patočka played an important part. It is my hope to further explore the links between Patočka and Friedmann in a future version of this project. However, for lack of space in the present work, I do not engage Friedmann's understanding of the concept of "socialism with a human face." However, I do hold that his invocation of that phrase is more a reference to the "spirit" of a socialism more in line with his own reading of Marx (and specifically Marx's ethics) *contra* the excesses of Stalin that he witnessed firsthand in the 1930s, *rather than* to any specific policies associated with the Czechoslovakian reformers (despite his clear sympathy for those figures and policies) or the like. See Chapter 2 below.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Hurley Robert (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 28.

spiritual exercises into a contemporary context, or to specify and deploy new forms of practice in a given historical circumstance. These very criteria are also, as I demonstrate, indispensable for addressing the second, though perhaps most central, guiding question of this study: what I call the politics of self-overcoming.

I.i.b. The Politics of Self-overcoming.

The primary question, then, which motivates this study on the whole is: what are the necessary political consequences, if any, of these differing conceptions of practices of ethical self-change, and of this category as a whole?

The problem of how we might understand the politics of spiritual exercises can be understood as a concretization of what is arguably the most fundamental question motivating this project, which, though for the most part implicit, provides its overarching structure at the greatest level of abstraction: That of the dynamics of the relationship between the political existence of collectivities and the moral lives of the individuals that make them up, with the former necessarily understood as something independent of and wholly other than the mere aggregation of the latter—something that is not just different in degree, but different in kind. To be clear, this is not to say that there is *no* role for the moral life of the individual in systemic and collective politics. Rather, my goal here is *precisely* to describe that point of contact—or at very least one possible way of framing and bringing about such a point of contact. Thus, at its most foundational level this work consists in an analysis of the imbrication of ethical and political life, or rather with the specification of one possible form of that this relationship may take. I seek to address this question of ethical-political mereology through the analysis of the category of

ethical self-overcoming, however unintuitive that may seem here, and even as this specific concern will primarily remain in the background.

Indeed, it is worth noting at the outset this project correlates closely with Frédéric Gros' reading of Foucault's own task in his final lectures, which I will paraphrase here as the attempt to think the ethical and the political together in such a way that neither is "prior" to the other.¹² Or, put somewhat differently, I will pose the question of just what could be meant by Foucault's enigmatic claim that "There is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself."¹³ Indeed, it would only be a slight exaggeration to say that this project as a whole can be read as a kind of extended meditation on this statement. I will argue that understanding the relationship of the kinds of ethical practices that concern me here will allow us to reframe the practical and conceptual relationships between individual moral action and collective and systemic political life, in at least one set of cases.

The political question, itself tightly bound to the question of emergence and translation, necessarily and in turn raises what I will argue is the primary negative criteria, the challenge and charge that faces any attempt to understand the politics of ethical practice. It is no coincidence that in the literature in question here, the language of the "spiritual" and a concern with ethical practices of self-change is consistently shadowed by an attending vocabulary, centered around a series of important distinctions and disclaimers. These specifications reflect an attending anxiety about the language of "spirituality," "spiritual exercises," the "care of the self," an "interior effort" and the idea of "self-purification," certain negative associations with such terms, and

¹² Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). See especially Gros' *Course Context*, p. 346, in which he describes the fundamental imbrication of *aletheia*, *politeia* and *ethos*, characterized by what he calls the "two principles of necessary correlation and definitive irreducibility;" truth, politics, and ethos, understood in terms of a kind of dependent co-origination.

¹³ *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005), 252.

above all a looming and consistent threat of misunderstanding that emerges from it. This is what I will refer to here, following Friedmann, as the problem of “spiritualism,” which must be understood in all of its complexity in order for these investigations to so much as get off the ground.

II. The Problem of Spiritualism.

In the representative piece “Spiritual Exercises,” Pierre Hadot cites Georges Friedmann with specific reference to the eponymous technical term, and lays out the trouble that tends to follow the idea of “spirituality.” As he says, “The expression is a bit disconcerting for the contemporary reader. In the first place, it is no longer quite fashionable these days to use the term ‘spiritual.’”¹⁴ As Hadot suggests here, the language of “spirituality” does not seem to generally inspire much philosophical confidence—among numerous other reliably negative associations that attach to the term. This “disconcertion” is paralleled by Friedmann’s own quick characterization of what he calls the “spiritual dimension” as something “so despised today.”¹⁵

These diagnoses of “the spiritual” as something either disconcerting, despised, or both, no doubt remain as accurate in the United States today as it was in France in the 1970s, certainly for the kind of academic audience that we continue to share. And as evinced by these diagnoses, Friedmann and Hadot are very clearly aware of the possibility that either misreading or outright dismissal could follow simply from the use of the language of the spiritual. They are well aware that a certain early ambiguity, if left unchecked, can and will quickly develop into an antipathy which would leave their own larger and more complex project vulnerable to misreading on

¹⁴ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford; New York: Blackwell, 1995), 81.

¹⁵ The spiritual is, “*actuellement si méprisé*,” as he puts it. (Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 10.)

numerous levels. In deploying the vocabulary of “spirituality” and “the spiritual,” they do so in a way that evinces a consistent concern that their work and their claims not be taken for something that is well beyond the strict definitions and examples that they invoke. For that reason, Hadot, Friedmann, and Foucault (as we will see) *all* take pains in a series of early disclaimers to distance their work from such associations.

Such disclaimers are, however, notably missing from the work of King. This is in no small part because the concept of self-purification that he describes in the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and deploys concretely in countless direct actions is by far the least vulnerable to the charge of spiritualism—one aspect, among several, of King’s special role in this project. Indeed, and to be clear, among the central arguments here is that while the other three authors allow us to identify the problem and in turn specify the formal criteria of its solution, they do not ultimately articulate that solution in detail. Simply looking at King, however, would most likely not bring these deeper questions to light. Conversely and as a result, it is only with the analysis of King and, in this case, the Montgomery Movement that we may theorize and describe concrete, historical exercises of political self-overcoming that meet those criteria both conceptually and in practice—and are therefore fully immune to the spiritualist challenge.

Friedmann, on the other hand, is representative here. In a way that reflects Hadot’s own early disclaimers, he opens *La puissance et la sagesse* by immediately specifying what the language of the “spiritual” does *not* mean for him. In an endnote¹⁶ to an early and important passage, he takes careful pains to distance his own work from what he calls *spiritualism*: “This term, ‘spiritual,’ will surprise, and perhaps even shock, certain readers. I was myself somewhat disturbed by its resonances, its association with ‘spiritualist’ doctrines or dogmas, which are so

¹⁶ That this point is rather urgent for Friedmann might be read into the fact that in the text itself, there is actually a footnote at the bottom of the page directing the reader to this endnote. (ibid.)

foreign to me.”¹⁷ In other words, Friedman recognizes that it is not without *some* good reason that the “spiritual dimension” has come to be “so despised,” as concepts and practices that he does find genuinely contemptible have attached to the term. These latter fall under the category of what he refers to here as *spiritualism*, which I adopt from that text.

The shared forms of contempt and disconcertion in question for Hadot and Friedmann certainly stem in no small part from the strong association of both the term “spiritual” and the notion of “spirituality” with seemingly unsophisticated and capricious forms of “vulgar religiosity” or “pop-spirituality,” ranging from late 19th and early 20th century forms of spiritualism-proper and theosophy, to contemporary New Age practices, “self-help” manuals, and so much else besides. In contemporary American culture (at least), such forms of religious life and their attending discourses are often associated with claims of the sort that one is “into yoga and very spiritual,”¹⁸ or somehow “spiritual but not religious,”¹⁹ and are taken to be affectively mawkish and doctrinally without substance. As the American sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow so concisely puts it, “Some observers...wonder whether ‘spiritual’ has become synonymous with ‘flaky.’”²⁰

But my goal here is not a defense of those maligned forms of popular religious life, to whatever extent such a defense is or is not called for. Rather, and again, I want to begin by very simply noting that Friedmann and others are very much aware of the kinds of associations the concepts in question carry with them—and indeed share a *certain* antipathy toward them—and yet insist on retaining a qualified and perhaps more precisely rendered technical vision of terms

¹⁷ Ibid., 443.

¹⁸ Cf. Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1998), 115, 52.

¹⁹ As Robert Wuthnow, among others, has documented, “growing numbers of Americans say they are spiritual but not religious, [and] many say that their spirituality is growing but the impact of religion on their lives is diminishing.” (ibid., 2.)

²⁰ Ibid., 1.

like “spiritual,” “spirituality,” “self-purification,” and “soul” nonetheless. Indeed, if we are to understand exactly what Hadot and Friedmann mean when they use the language of the spiritual it is worth beginning with the simple observation that they explicitly do in spite of both the negative connotations it tends to carry with it, and the ambiguity that surrounds it.

The question is thus the specification of that antipathy, which on my reading *in no way* amounts to superficial forms of either aesthetic discomfort or metaphysical disagreement.²¹ It is instead the result of what I take to be the most fundamental historical and philosophical challenge to any of these formulations, and which is already evinced in the language that all of these thinkers marshal in their respective “disclaimers.” If Michel Foucault is at pains to distance his “ethical” work from the “Californian cult of the self”²² and what both he and Pierre Hadot call a kind of “moral dandyism,”²³ and so on, then what must they mean when they invoke this kind of language?

The problem is in fact already evinced by the way that I have phrased the question, as we must avoid confusing the specific philosophical, ethical and political questions that Friedmann, Foucault, Hadot, and even King are trying to raise on the one hand, with the kinds of popular concerns and associations that attach so immediately to a term like “spirituality” on the other. We need to be just as clear and precise about what these thinkers are *rejecting*, and *why*, as we do about what it is that they are endorsing. Thus we are compelled to emphasize that whatever

²¹ In other words, there is nothing about the work of Hadot, Friedmann, Foucault, *or even King* that would discount an analysis of, for example, contemporary New Age practices, through the framework of the ethics—or politics—of practices of self-overcoming.

²² Michel Foucault, “On The Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of a Work in Progress,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, *Essential works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984* (New York: The New Press, 1994), 271.

²³ *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, 12. Interestingly, it is of *Foucault’s* own work that Hadot poses the question of whether or not what we have in the former’s notion of “the care of the self” is nothing more than “a new form of Dandyism, late twentieth-century style.” (Pierre Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford; New York: Blackwell, 1995), 211.)

spirituality is, there are certain criteria that constitute the category of what Friedmann calls spiritualism that are determinative of what it *is not*.

At the same time, it should be equally clear that it is not simply a matter of clarifying what Hadot and Friedmann *do* mean by distinguishing it from what they do *not* mean, and then dispensing with the latter. Rather, here the problem of spiritualism is dialectically related to the relevant understanding of spirituality: to understand the beliefs, practices and general forms that the writers in question want to include also allows us to see why seemingly “spiritualist” doctrines—whether only apparently or actually “spiritualist” in the sense to be specified—or practices cannot simply be dismissed or declared irrelevant. Further, what seem like disclaimers in fact begin to reveal *why* and *how* what we are calling spiritualism does indeed present real problems and genuine challenges to what it is that much of the present work will concern itself to articulate.

II.i. Moral Dandies and Unfashionable Spirits.

In order to gain that purchase, however, we need to begin by untangling a knot in two parts. The consistent first hurdle is the conflation of the spiritual in general with what are taken to be the more undesirable trappings of spiritualism, which so often hijack and re-direct the kinds of questions that I want to raise, and thus prevent any such conversation from so much as getting off the ground. (The second is the specification of what is actually at issue in the disclaimers in question, and why it represents a genuine problem and real challenge to any formulation of practices of self-change.)

In other words, the most immediate aesthetic or affective rejections of the beliefs and practices that Wuthnow investigates are indeed un-rigorous; to reject a set of beliefs because they “seem flaky” is completely superficial. But even recognizing this fact raises a second, and more

important problem: the conflation of *a rejection of those trappings with a series of much more fundamental philosophical and ethical concerns*. If we think that Friedmann dismisses spiritualism for superficial reasons, then obscure our ability to see the truly substantive issues that motivate him without even knowing that we have done so. In other words, we need to be as clear as possible about *what it is important here to identify and reject*, and *what is simply a distraction*. To assume that *any* strong response to what we are calling spiritual practices is merely superficial, and thus unfair, is to already begin to miss the more fundamental critique *and therefore* the line of thinking that will ultimately lead to *the positive* specification of the criteria of spirituality.

Regarding our first hurdle, two very general points will lend some clarity, and allow us to move to the second:

II.i.a Being Beyond Nature

First, the term “spiritual” itself tends to most immediately suggest a category marked by certain metaphysical concerns—in the popular sense of that term—including, perhaps above all, belief in varying forms of interaction with objects taken to exist beyond nature, in either a more traditional religious sense *or* in the terms used by the subjects of Wuthnow’s study, for example. However, it is clear by even a cursory glance at the philosophical texts in question that when Friedmann or Foucault use the term “spiritual,” they certainly do not mean it in the sense of either “having to do with spirits,” or the divine in general. *That* this is the case for those writers is so uncontroversial as to merit only a passing statement. King is a less clear case here, given his strong religious commitments. However, it is still the case that his concept of “self-purification” can be misunderstood in ways that track directly with Friedmann’s concerns. As I argue in

Chapter 4, “self-purification” is here a substantive political concept and practice, though it is still one that can be misunderstood for superficial reasons comparable to those Friedmann begins to articulate.

The problem is still more complex, however: Friedmann’s distinction between spirituality and spiritualism is made *not* for the sole or primary purpose of excluding given forms of practice based on either superficial trappings or metaphysical commitments. The important point is not that these criteria exclude a given example from the domain of spirituality, but rather that *they are completely irrelevant to the definition of that category itself*. Put differently, the adjudication of the truth-content of metaphysical statements about the existence of such objects or beings, as we would find in the traditional philosophy of religion, is irrelevant to both this project and the thinkers it will engage. More to the point, neither spirituality nor spiritualism are synonymous with “religion” here, however we might define that term.

That Wuthnow’s subjects, for example, believe in ghosts, angels and the like, may indeed be a source of discomfort for someone like Friedmann surely cannot be denied. But if the “spiritual” here does not *necessarily* imply a concern with objects beyond nature, it does not *necessarily* exclude them either. If “metaphysical content” is in no way a definitional criterion of what we mean when we use the technical term “spiritual,” it is an *equally irrelevant criterion of dismissal* from that category. For that reason, if the spiritual is not synonymous with such beliefs, there may indeed still be room for certain forms of the latter within the former as it will be reconstructed here. In a way that will perhaps appear more puzzling (to certain audiences at least) than an endorsement of either pole in this opposition, the metaphysical content of the category “spiritualism” is *completely irrelevant* to what I will argue is the far more robust notion of the *spiritual* as deployed and developed by the figures in question here.

II.ii.b. The Inscrutable Shopping Cart

A second, and equally pressing problem with the kind of spiritualism to be distinguished from spirituality in the technical sense, is the possibility that a given set of beliefs and practices may seem doctrinally incoherent. This is one possible reading, or even definition, of what Wuthnow means when he rehearses the concern that certain beliefs and practices are “flaky.” It cannot be denied that New Age thought and yoga-studio philosophy can appear this way: rather than a cohesive set of beliefs and practices, we often observe something akin to a shopping cart (to invoke the “marketplace” metaphor) full of spiritual odds and ends, chosen and brought together haphazardly for their affective purchase rather than any more robust criteria, pragmatic or otherwise.

The problem, of course, with this approach is that it lacks its own criteria for the assessment not simply of the coherence of such practices, but of a notion of “coherence” itself appropriate to the task. In fact, there may indeed be forms of seemingly “incoherent” constellations of doctrines and practices that do fit the criteria of spirituality, but we do not yet have those criteria, and thus cannot yet judge. This equally applies to both “metaphysical content” and “doctrinal coherence.” Thus, any genuinely rigorous re-approach to such material, on my part at least, could *only* occur on the other side of the present work. In other words, there may well be a place for certain forms, or even simply aspects, of what has been typically called spiritualism (in the popular sense) within what these thinkers call spirituality, although, again, I take it that we currently lack the proper standards by which such a judgment can be made. And although this problem falls outside the bounds of this project, the production and specification of

the very resources we would need to appraise, let alone judge, such traditions and practices, are themselves tasks necessary to my success here.

II.ii. Egoism, Retreat, and Moralism

All of this is to say that there are far more pressing matters than “spirits” and “flakiness” at issue. The disclaimers of Hadot and Friedmann should serve not simply to dismiss such trappings outright, but to draw our attention to the fact that whereas they seem quite important in the popular discourse around spirituality, they are actually irrelevant in terms of what we are ultimately after. Indeed, if, as I argue in Chapter 4, King’s conception of self-purification vis-à-vis direct action fundamentally links up with Hadot’s spiritual exercises, then this point becomes even more important.

“Spiritualism” has come to already serve as a kind of foil here, though it should be clear that the term does not necessarily apply to the forms of popular religious life referenced above. Neither metaphysics nor affect are constitutive criteria of either the spiritual or spiritualism on this model, and are, on their own, grounds for neither endorsement nor dismissal. In other words, there is nothing about the work of Hadot, Friedmann, or Foucault—and certainly not King’s thought or political practice—that would discount an analysis of, for example, contemporary American New Age practices, through the framework of spiritual exercises, the care of the self, and so on.

What then, do we mean by “spiritualism?” What is the substantive concern behind the disclaimers that I have rehearsed above, and why *must* all of these thinkers take it seriously as a *genuine* challenge to their respective analyses of the category of practices of self-overcoming? Where Hadot and Friedmann remain slightly vague on this point, (and as King does not need to

address it), Foucault is characteristically clear, explicitly identifying what I take to be the first and most fundamental criteria for a working distinction between the spiritual and the spiritualist. The real danger, the genuine challenge to any invocation of the spiritual, and therefore the central criteria of spiritualism, is the charge of *egoism*.

II.ii.a. Egoism

With words of caution redolent of Hadot and Friedmann's own disclaimers, though with a slightly more productive specificity, Foucault begins to describe this challenge in the opening passages of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, in his elaboration of the idea of the care of the self:

Just to begin with, entirely superficially and without resolving anything, but as something that we should maybe bear in mind, I think we can say that there is something a bit disturbing for us in this principle of the care of the self. Indeed, going through the texts, the different forms of philosophy and the different forms of exercises and philosophical or spiritual practices, we see the principle of care of the self expressed in a variety of phrases like: 'caring for oneself,' 'taking care of oneself,' 'withdrawing into oneself,' 'retiring into the self,' 'finding one's pleasure in oneself,' 'seeking no other delight but in the self,' 'remaining in the company of oneself,' 'being the friend of oneself,' 'being in oneself as in a fortress,' 'looking after' or 'devoting oneself to oneself,' 'respecting oneself,' etc. Now you are all well aware that there is a certain tradition (or rather several traditions) that dissuades us (us, now, today) from giving any positive value to all of these expressions, precepts and rules, and above all from making them the basis of a morality. All these injunctions to exalt oneself, to devote oneself to oneself, to turn in on oneself, to offer service to oneself, sound to our ears like...a sort of challenge and defiance, a desire for radical ethical change, a sort of moral dandyism, the assertion-challenge of a fixed esthetic and individual stage. Or else they sound to us like a somewhat melancholy and sad expression of the withdrawal of the individual who is unable to hold onto and keep firmly before his eyes, in his grasp and for himself, a collective morality (that of the city-state, for example), and who, faced with the disintegration of this collective morality, has naught else to do but attend to himself. So, the immediate, initial connotations and overtones of all of these expressions direct us away from thinking about these precepts in positive terms."²⁴

As Foucault concludes, "we have the paradox of a precept of care of the self which signifies for us either egoism or withdrawal,"²⁵ and which Foucault, in *all* of his work on the care of the self, takes great pains to avoid.

²⁴ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, 12.

²⁵ MF HS 13

Foucault’s conclusion is nearly identical to Hadot’s rejection of any conception of a “care of the self” that seems “focused far too much on the ‘self.’”²⁶ And Friedmann, for his part, is even closer, when he argues that “The first condition is, on the level of the individual, that we do not accept the withdrawal into the self.”²⁷ What Friedmann thus calls the “escape into *spiritualism* or mystical comforts,” then, is characterized by and reflective of “a negative and desperate attitude...and religious or secular forms of retreat from the world.”²⁸ Such a “retreat” into oneself is a form of self-absorption,²⁹ a way of “looking-inward” that does not result in productive relations outward; it does not cultivate, but rather compromises or precludes, both robust ethical relations with others, and positive political relations with and within larger human collectivities.³⁰ Spiritualism, then, is fundamentally characterized by *a relationship to oneself that precludes robust relations with others*—including, and perhaps especially, liberatory political relations. It is again for this reason that explicit disclaimers of this kind are rare or non-existent for King. His religious-political work can only operate—that is, take effective concrete form in mass direct action—from a perspective and within a practice that already excludes the forms of egoism in question. This is in turn precisely the reason that King plays the central theoretical and historical role in this project.

And so, King aside, the disclaimers in question reveal that all of these figures, are not only aware of the danger of being read in this way, but *also* take what I am calling spiritualism to be a genuine danger and challenge to their respective projects. And again, it is only by specifying that danger that we can, at the end of this project, come to see the full force and depth of King’s

²⁶ Hadot, “Reflections on the Idea of the ‘Cultivation of the Self,’” 207.

²⁷ Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 132.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁹ Indeed, if Wuthnow’s “flakiness” means anything substantive, it is precisely this.

³⁰ Spiritualism, put bluntly, is *useless*.

contribution to its amelioration. For Hadot and Foucault as we will see, this acknowledgement is often implicit, and must be excavated from the texts by contrasting the handful of explicit disclaimers made with the larger trajectories of their work taken as a whole.

Friedmann, however, seems to take this specification at least one very small but productive step further. This is because he explicitly acknowledges—however briefly—that his own work is on some level vulnerable to charges of the very spiritualism from which he seeks to distance himself. And in so doing, he also makes it clear that any such “withdrawal” into the self is not only subject to ethical criticism, but is also a retreat from everyday life and an abnegation of larger social and political responsibilities. As he says at the opening of *La puissance*:

Its title [*Wisdom and Power*] is likely to bring about a misunderstanding, but one which should dissipate with this preface. The wisdom which is so necessary today is not a form of contemplation, a retreat from the unrest and abominations of the century. Far from being “rationalistic,” in the restrictive sense of the term, I refer here to “reason” in the sense understood by Jaspers, which envelopes and includes a potential of intellect and love, everything in human beings that can aid us in *becoming human*, everything that can contribute to our “*humanization*.” It is an unquiet wisdom, one that is active and audacious, and which, in the eyes of some, appears more or less ridiculous, but so be it.”³¹

For Friedmann then, the spiritualism he rejects and the “spiritual dimension” he seeks to explicate are already political categories, just as they are already ethical categories. And the “unquiet wisdom” he pursues must not be mistaken for *quietism*, a contemplative “retreat” from the political domain.

At the same time, while Friedmann claims here that the “misunderstanding” to which *La puissance* is susceptible should simply dissipate thanks to the disclaimers provided in his Introduction, I take the threat of that misunderstanding slightly more seriously. Indeed, I argue in Chapter 2 that his entire philosophical and sociological oeuvre in fact evinces a much greater concern than this single statement would lead us to believe. Further and more precisely, I take

³¹ Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 11.

the specification of what he calls spiritualism to provide a crucial conceptual tool not just for understanding Friedmann's own project, but for understanding the larger category of practices of ethical self-overcoming as a whole. Like Hadot, it is not simply a matter of clarifying what Friedmann *does* mean by distinguishing it from what he does *not* mean, and then dispensing with the latter—even if that is what Friedmann himself appears to suggest here. Rather, what may seem like mere disclaimers in fact begin to reveal *why* and *how* what we are calling spiritualism does indeed present real problems and genuine challenges to what much of the present work will concern itself to articulate.

Spiritualism is not, then, something to be distinguished and discarded, but instead a real problem to be articulated and criticized in an ongoing manner, and which puts enormously productive pressure on *all* of these formulations, including King's. It is however because that problem is the least visible on the surface of King's thought and action that these other conceptions are so necessary for bringing it to light there. And as I have already suggested, the quick disclaimers we see early on in many of the texts in question actually mask the fact that they do not simply dispense with spiritualism, but are to varying degrees also out to critique and to criticize it. Friedmann's work, taken as a whole, provides a delimitation of the concept, and serves to demonstrate what is so wrong, and indeed so dangerous, about it. The same may be said of Foucault and Hadot as well, though perhaps the former more so. That delimitation also in turn provides a way of analyzing Friedmann's own project, as well as those of Hadot, Foucault, and King. It thus serves as a clear and reliable standard against which we may measure their respective claims and observations regarding "the spiritual dimension," variously construed, and the broader category of practices of ethical self-overcoming, including King's political self-purification.

In this way, the specification of this concept further contributes to the development of the larger set of analytic tools which the present work seeks to provide, in the service of understanding spiritual exercises, religious practices, and forms of ethical self-fashioning more broadly. And although it is his own coinage, Friedmann's use of the term "spiritualism" to very generally refer to the problem of egoism is thus coherent with Hadot and Foucault, and relevant to King. For that reason, I adopt it throughout the present work, with the explicit understanding that it will continue to grow and develop along with other central concepts.

As the political consequences of spiritualism are very much themselves a source of concern here, they are also worth spelling out in some preliminary detail. There are at least two practical consequences that at least *implicitly* worry each of these thinkers—though in different ways and to different extents for each, as we will see. They are, first, certain forms of "retreat" or "withdrawal," and second, and more importantly, what I will once again follow Friedmann in calling *moralism*.

II.ii.b. Retreat and Withdrawal

At its most mild, spiritualism would hold itself to a kind of impossible "apolitical" status, a conscious and willing "retreat," as Friedmann describes it. Such an approach would hold that it is possible to take up a form of life characterized by practices of self-transformation or engage in moral actions which either do not have political consequences, or which allow one to somehow disengage from political responsibility. Such "retreat" most *apparently* takes the form of monasticism or hermeticism, a withdrawal from the world, to engage in spiritual progress. However, we must again be as clear as possible: just as we cannot judge from an uninvestigated or merely surface analysis whether or not given regimens of spiritual practice do or do not

constitute a spiritualism from their trappings, it would require a deeper level of case-by-case analysis to determine whether a form of *monasticism* is indeed a form of *retreat*. As we will see, Friedmann, Foucault, Hadot, and King are all clear that one may well engage in “retreat” or withdrawal in the very midst of everyday life, among the masses of other people, and so on—without physically removing oneself, becoming a hermit, or the like.

Conversely, they all acknowledge that, as Friedmann puts it, “asceticism as means of spiritual progress”³² does not necessarily itself amount to “retreat.” In this way, the withdrawal criticized here is in no way synonymous with monasticism or asceticism as concrete instantiations of spiritual practice, institutional or otherwise. The terms “retreat” and “withdrawal,” as I will use them here and again following Friedmann, thus explicitly refer to an egoistic removal of oneself from others; they are, in other words, forms of *spiritualist*—rather than *spiritual*—exercise. They do not, however, necessarily correspond to *any particular form of practice, nor even to physical or social isolation*. As King clearly warns, one may cultivate egoism in the midst of a political community, and one may cultivate robust ethical and political relationships with others in the isolation of the monastic setting.³³

II.ii.c. Moralism

The second problem is related to the first in complex ways that I will also return to over the course of this project. At its worst, a spiritualist politics would, as an egoist politics, either directly posit or pragmatically enact a form of political life which takes the ethical life of the discrete individual as its fundamental building block. Such a view necessarily takes the political

³² *Ibid.*, 151.

³³ Rosa Parks’ visit to the Highlander Folk School in the summer of 1955, four months before her famous refusal to give up her seat on the Montgomery Bus Boycott, is an ideal example here, and one that I address in Chapter 4.

lives of groups and systems to amount to the mere aggregation of the ethical lives of the individuals that make them up. In our own context such a view is either implicitly or explicitly evinced in neo-liberal discourse and policy, and the particular forms of 20th and 21st century American conservatism.³⁴ Politics in this case, is simply ethics writ-large; the political, systemic whole as the simple sum of its ethical parts.

As we will see in Chapter 2, this is one of the two great extremes that Georges Friedmann tries to navigate. Within the context of his ongoing reflections on the lessons of the USSR and the standard Western criticisms of the Soviet project, Friedmann is consistently concerned by any reduction of economic and material concerns to the aggregated behaviors of individuals. It is this impulse that he dubs *moralism*:

“I have indicated several of these grand problems which today call for a combat to designate goals and give rise to values. There are certainly many others which are essential in the countries and on the continents which I have not yet visited. But, wherever they implant themselves on the planet, these efforts are present and tied to one another. They all demand *coordinated action* because it is their spirit and their flesh, collective struggles in order to ameliorate institutions and organize societies...*It is moral (and we must qualify that), but is in no way a “moralism”—the more or less conscious illusion, the pride and hypocrisy of those who pretend to bring a “morality” to human beings, without addressing or attending to the material conditions necessary for a truly human life: the elements fundamentally required for our well-being, without which there is no question, for the immense majority of human beings—setting aside for the moment the case of asceticism as means of spiritual progress, whether explicitly religious or not—of ‘morality,’ or happiness. I recall here, deliberately, the notion of happiness that certain critics of “consumer society” include in their confused condemnations.*³⁵

Now, where “moralism” typically refers to the habit of “moralizing,” of casting judgment on the ethical behaviors or principles of others, Friedmann very clearly uses the term in a different

³⁴ For example, Chief Justice John G. Roberts statement that “The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race,” in the Supreme Court’s 2007 *Parents Involved* decision, is an archetypical claim of moralist politics. (See Ronald Turner, “The Way to Stop Discrimination on the Basis of Race...,” *Stanford Journal of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties* 11, no. 45 (2015).)

³⁵ Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 151, emphasis added. Friedmann goes on to reemphasize his foundational commitment to the importance of material and economic conditions understood as something other than and beyond the ethical: “Habitat, food, housing, adaptation to one’s work, reduction of fatigue, breaks and relaxation: needs that have long been at the center of my studies. They have lost nothing of their importance in my eyes. Their satisfaction is the prerequisite to any humanization that amounts to more than words.”

sense. Moralism, for him, amounts to a near-total emphasis on ethics and behavior that is not founded in a concern for material and economic well-being. Or, more precisely, moralism sees the latter as the mere consequence of the former. Such a moralism is, for example, evinced by the case of facile critiques of consumerism that he invokes here: the idea that shifts in consumption habits, or ambiguous claims about the effects of certain forms of consumption on “character,” can somehow, someday, “scale up” to material equity.

Moralism, in Friedmann’s sense, is thus the political consequence (or incarnation) of spiritualism. A spiritualist politics would amount to a moralism if it held, implicitly or explicitly, that *the aggregation of moral transformation brought about the practice of spiritual exercises on a mass scale by discrete individuals would on its own result in radical, and desirable, political change*, including material and economic justice.

II.ii.d. A brief note on Friedmann’s “Marxisme naïf”

Now, as we will see in Chapter 2 and as I have already alluded to above, for Friedmann, moralism is contrasted with what he takes to be its antithesis, which he describes as the *Marxisme naïf* of his own youth,³⁶ and which persists for him (and for us) among his comrades and fellow leftists:

The element that most effectively explains the penetration of this amoral ‘realism’ among certain Western intellectuals (of whom so many are, in fact, honest people) and among the people is the following: in the mechanistic interpretation of Marxism, we rely exclusively on the importance of economic and social transformation, which would allow for the creation of a new society, and “new human beings.” Suppress capitalism and the private ownership of the means of production, and the individual, as a materially liberated being, will also be morally liberated. Automation. Transform the *setting* (I employ this term as an image) of human life, and it will find itself upended.”³⁷

³⁶ Ibid., 10.

³⁷ Ibid., 57-60.

This view, the inverse of moralism, does not simply prioritize the economic, material, and large-scale systemic conditions of human flourishing, but rather takes the ethical life of the individual to be either wholly reducible to or a mere byproduct of those conditions. There is for the “naïve Marxist” also a *merely causal* relationship between the ethical and the political, the disagreement is simply in the direction of effect. It remains a counter-discourse within the same framework and terms, and does not reconceive—perhaps simply does not think to reconceive—those foundational terms, concepts, and relationships.

This, however, is a much more complex question, and stands just enough outside the scope and goals of the present work that I must bracket it here. And so, although this view is important to grasp for the purposes of the current project, I do not engage it to anything like the extent and depth that I engage the problem of spiritualism. And to the extent that it is relevant here, it is not for the sake of some kind of facile moderation, as it does not have a kind of equal-but-inverted standing, at least not for my project here, and its invocation does not amount to some kind of “both-sides-ism.”

Instead, it is relevant to my purposes because as a strict counter- or reverse-discourse to spiritualism, *Marxisme naïf* operates according to precisely the same logic, though with a merely inverted set of values and conclusions. That is, rather than an ethical reductionism, it represents the economic, material, and indeed political reductionism that Friedmann saw evinced over the course of the 20th century by those, and they were many, who refused to learn the lessons of the Soviet failure, at least as he saw it. But its historical origins are less important (and I will treat them only very minimally in Chapter 2, for want of space and need) than its form of reasoning. It is important because it is the view, or at least the impulse, from which the most standard criticisms of the idea of a politics of self-overcoming emerge. In other words, it is from the

perspective of *Marxisme naïf* that the very charges of ethical spiritualism and political moralism are most likely to be leveled at the class of practices that concern me here.

Thus, and above all, it is precisely the naïve Marxist who is most likely to either dismiss the category of practices that concern me here for superficial reasons on the one hand, *or* for a mis-construal of the deeper political and theoretical questions at issue. This is because, as we will see in Chapter 3 with Foucault, his conception of the care of the self *necessarily entails a reformulation of the relationship of ethics to politics in which neither is taken to be prior to the other*, and thus abandons the very logic by which both spiritualism itself *and* Friedmann's *Marxisme naïf* operate. Indeed, Friedmann too is clear at the very outset of *La puissance* that precisely such a fundamental reformulation is his goal.³⁸

It is for this reason that the charge of spiritualism or moralism is most often leveled from what amounts to a form of *Marxisme naïf*. This is precisely because such a perspective so easily overlooks the ways in which any truly robust politics of self-overcoming necessarily entails a reformulation of the relationship of the ethical lives of individuals to the political lives of groups and systems. The irony is that the very framework of the critical position causes it to overlook the fact that thinkers like Friedmann and Foucault *are also deeply concerned about spiritualism and moralism for precisely the same reasons*: they do not want to fall into a mere ethical reductionism. The naïve Marxist however remains fundamentally unaware however that in order to do so, Foucault, for example, must reformulate the logic by which the former operates and *from which* that very charge is leveled—and without explicitly understanding that reformulation, the care of the self or the “interior effort” can end up looking a lot like spiritualism. Such a view is also very likely behind certain forms of skepticism with regard to King's religious

³⁸ See Chapter 2 below.

commitments in general, and indeed his principled *and* practical commitment to nonviolent tactics.

We will never, Friedmann and Foucault are clear, recycle or handshake our way to human liberation—even as these are *precisely the charges that the naïve Marxist is likely to level upon the invocation of the idea of the “spiritual.”* Nor does King’s nonviolent political strategy amount to an attempt to bring about large-scale political change through somehow appealing to the “hearts” of the oppressor, one at a time. Such a criticism radically misconstrues the ways in which nonviolent tactics provoke political crisis because, as I argue, those tactics and their critics operate according to fundamentally different forms of reasoning. If the latter, the *Marxiste naïf*, in all of these cases, simply assumes that the former (the practitioner and theorist of exercises of self-change) is working from a partial or incorrect view of its own perspective, it is little wonder that the such practices will be uncritically reduced to a form of spiritualism.

It is no exaggeration to say that this is *precisely* what most critics of the late Foucault take to be the political consequence of his “turn” to ethics. Again, and as we will see in greater detail in Chapter 3, such a view can only result from a profound misunderstanding of the very notion of the care of the self, and indeed of spiritual exercises, that Foucault is after in the late works. Such a view also fails to see, quite simply, that Foucault himself directly criticizes any such vision. Indeed, this is *precisely* the problem—or, one of the problems—with the “California cult of the self”—*not* that it takes up an aesthetically unpleasant or affectively suspicious way of life. Indeed and to re-emphasize, on my reading the question is never one of the outward trappings of given forms of work on oneself, but rather of both the conception of the self and the relationship to the self—in terms of its consequences for the relationship to the other—that they cultivate.

Like Friedmann, Foucault thus rejects spiritualism even as he remains, legitimately, concerned not to slide into it. Moralism is also the likely critique of any politically-minded reading of Hadot, just as it looms large in the background of all of Friedmann's engagements. In the case of Friedmann, the problem is that his criticism of the contemporary socialist's quasi-exclusive emphasis on the material (and this is in part what he means above by the "history of the communist movement," etc.) can be so easily misunderstood as a wholesale abandonment of the socialist project. And the fact that such a reading is so much as possible, let alone so easy to make, is itself evidence of the problem at hand, and of the real threat of the charge of spiritualism.

In some sense then, the critical view is absolutely correct: spiritualism and moralism are indeed real, and constitute the most fundamental challenge to any conception of exercises of self-change in general, and any attempt to understand and articulate the political content and consequences of such practices in particular. What that view disallows itself from recognizing, however, is that this is a problem at *all* of these thinkers take seriously and a charge from which they all seek to distance themselves.

It is for this reason that I argue over the course of this work that spiritualism is a problem that Friedmann and Foucault explicitly recognize can only be avoided through a fundamental reformulation of the way in which we construe the relationship of ethics to politics. I argue here that even as he does not seem to recognize this problem explicitly, the conceptual and historical resources that Hadot provides are indispensable for both articulating the problem and providing some of the key formal criteria for its resolution. Further, as I argue in Chapter 1, that work is in fact predicated on an approach to Hadot's oeuvre which takes seriously his prescriptive goal of bringing ancient spiritual exercises into the present, *and* the ways in which that prescriptive goal

intersects with his painstaking “descriptive” historical methodologies. In this way, Hadot, Friedmann, and Foucault, respectively, allow me to articulate this problem and to begin to specify the criteria by which it may be resolved. However, I demonstrate in Chapter 4 that among the voices that I engage here, it is *only* with King that a truly robust and explicit resolution to this legitimate threat can be formulated. Understanding both why and how this is the case wholly depend on the success of the preparatory work that precedes the historical-philosophical analysis of King and the Montgomery Movement with which this project culminates.

III. On the Politics of Self-Overcoming: Method

I have felt it necessary to begin this project with this set of lengthy and perhaps overly-detailed disclaimers, as it is inevitable that certain questions and concerns arise immediately upon the invocation of any discussion of this kind. Indeed, it should be at least somewhat clear how easy it is for a discussion of the spiritual to be confused with an endorsement of a spiritualism. It is not just that the terms themselves are similar. Rather, without a great deal of care and specification, given spiritual exercises can very well appear as *spiritualist* exercises, and vice versa. Further still, it is in fact possible under any of a range of differing circumstances, the same formal practice could very well amount to either, and the distinction may only be apparent under close and careful scrutiny: The practitioners that someone like Wuthnow describes simply cannot be judged based on surface-level readings of whatever it is they happen to be doing, whether that means attending yoga classes in an office complex or a prayer or meditation retreat in a traditional monastic setting.

Many simply bristle at terms like “spiritual,” and without directly addressing those superficial forms of discomfort, whatever their origins, a project of this kind will never even get off the ground. It has been my hope to simply dispense with these kinds of ultimately irrelevant aesthetic or affective hesitations, in order to take up the more difficult, genuine challenges that these themes and this body of work present.

Others are subject to a perhaps more sophisticated form of discomfort, in that they understand that ethical egoism and its counterpart in political moralism are indeed the central problems that these themes face. The assumption there, however, is that thinkers like Friedmann or Foucault are not themselves explicitly aware of precisely that danger, and the fact that much of their work is indeed a direct response to it is thus overlooked. This kind of “naïve Marxism,” to borrow Friedmann’s phrase, or generalized pop-leftism, is thus likely to preclude a study of this kind, and resort to unsophisticated charges of a “spiritualization” of politics, which amounts *precisely* to the spiritualism—that is, the moralism—I’ve already begun to describe. Such readers, again, recognize the real problem, but assume on the one hand that there is no solution, and on the other that thinkers like Foucault are somehow blind to it. I argue here that, Foucault, Friedmann, and Hadot are all aware, to varying degrees, of the spiritualist challenge, as evinced by the many early disclaimers that we have begun to rehearse here. As I demonstrate over the course of this project, there is rather robust textual evidence that spiritualist egoism is in some form or another an ever-present concern within *all* of this literature. I argue, finally, that while this problem also presents a challenge to someone like King, we require a detailed analysis of the other thinkers represented here to: First, recognize how and why it is also a potential problem for him; and Second, how and why his philosophical, theological, and political work on the whole

presents thorough, unique, and exciting solutions and counter-challenges to precisely those problems.

This project as a whole can thus be understood as a rebuttal to the idea that any research in this direction is fated to egoism, and thus to moralism. At the same time, it must also be made clear that I seek to develop a *formal*, philosophical-theoretical, category by way of the investigation of concrete historical examples. However, I do *not* seek to engage any of the historical material that appears in this project as mere examples to be paired with a theory. Rather, it is among my goals here to develop, *en passant*, a kind of methodological “history and philosophy of religion,” or of ethical practices of self-change at least. Here, historical material, and the work on King, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Bayard Rustin, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the history of non-violent organizing in the 20th century in general which comprise Chapter 4, serves the positive theoretical role in challenging and developing the conceptual apparatus which precedes it. (It should be noted that Hadot, Friedmann, and Foucault all deploy a historical-philosophical methodology themselves.)

Finally, to the extent that this is a theoretically and methodologically synthetic and constructive project on my part, it is because these analyses together open up new possibilities for the theorization of the role of ethical and religious practice more generally, and within the field of Religious Studies in particular. Indeed, one of the ultimate but less-stated goals here (along with the ethical-political mereology I describe above) will be to lay the theoretical groundwork for the use of these varying conceptions, together or individually, in the theorization and critical analyses of religious and other forms of self-directed practices of self-change. I am especially interested in those places where such “ethical” pursuits intersect with structural and political questions, and more general questions of the relationships of individual practitioners to

the communities they inhabit. The constructive, synthetic thread within my work emerges in part because no one of these conceptions on its own provides the full range of tools required to diagnose and address the political question as I see it, or to provide the new theoretical lens which I hope to deploy elsewhere in the future.

And so, among the implicit goals of this project are: 1) a set of theoretical tools by which we may recognize the *political* irrelevance of certain aesthetic and metaphysical aspects of given practices of self-change; 2) a way of raising and investigating the general problem of the relationship between the ethical lives of individuals and the political lives of groups and systems, what I call an “ethical-political mereology; and 3) the preliminary development, in process, of a methodological history and philosophy of religions, modeled to some extent on the history and philosophy of science on the one hand, and the philosophical-historical approach of Hadot, Friedmann, Foucault, and even King, on the other. For the purposes of this project, these much broader goals will remain in the background and at a certain level of abstraction, as they can only be accomplished on the other side of this work itself. It is however worth making it explicit that they do implicitly guide this research on that very level of abstraction.

Much more immediately, this project will address what I take to be the two most fundamental challenges to any specification of this category as a whole: First, the possibility of specifying what I call “properly contemporary” practices of self-change; Second, the possibility of a non-moralist, anti-egoist, politics of self-overcoming.

This project addresses these two questions and the relationship between them by: 1) Articulating the formal, theoretical criteria necessary for any translation of given spiritual exercises from one historical context to another *or* any specification of new forms of spiritual exercise; 2) Identifying the kind of historical analysis of given religious, material, and political

(etc.) conditions that is necessarily entailed by those formal criteria; 3) Demonstrating that the precise form of theoretical-historical analysis required for the identification and elaboration of properly contemporary practices of ethical self-overcoming is *also* necessary for any specification of a genuine and non-reductive politics of self-overcoming; 4) Arguing that the political goal requires a theoretical reevaluation of the relationship of ethics to politics by first demonstrating the historical and philosophical possibility of a case in which, as Hadot puts it, the care of oneself is “indissolubly, care for others,”³⁹ and vice-versa, in a way that does not give either causal priority over the others; 5) Building off of this insight through an investigation and elaboration of at least one historical case in which practices of self-change play an integrated and *non-reductive* role in mass politics; that is, a case in which care for oneself, care for others, care for the community, and structural, material change manifest coterminously and inextricably through the same practices and constellations of practice.

The dissertation proceeds as follows:

IV. Chapter Overview

Chapter 1. Pierre Hadot: Ancient Spiritual Exercises and Contemporary Spiritual Demands.

Pierre Hadot sets the conceptual and historical stage of this project, by introducing ancient spiritual exercises in all of their historical specificity, and as a model for any formulation of practices of this kind. Along with the particular details of the various schools, Hadot’s methodology demonstrates a necessary connection between the forms that given practices take,

³⁹ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 111.

the motivations for taking them up, and the goals or ideals toward which one aims in such exercises.

I argue that because Hadot also seeks to “offer contemporary mankind a way of life” (what I call his “prescriptive project”) by reintroducing ancient spiritual exercises, he provides a formal model for the kinds of criteria that any properly contemporary spiritual exercises would need to meet. Further, the precise forms that any such practice would take would need to be tailored to the specificity of the historical conditions—political, economic, religious, technological, etc.—which give rise to the motivation to take up such practices, or the “spiritual demands” which they are meant to address.

I then engage Hadot’s exhaustive analyses of ancient spiritual exercises (the “descriptive project”)—specifically his central injunction that they must always be situated in their own cultural, historical, and literary conditions of emergence—in light of the needs of the ethically prescriptive aspects of his work. I argue that his historical researches also provide the formal model required to so much as begin to translate ancient spiritual exercises into differing historical contexts, or to constitute and recognize new forms of practice appropriate to new and different spiritual demands. It is not, however, simply that his method provides a kind of model. Rather, I argue that Hadot’s work demonstrates that the form such contemporary analyses must take are a direct consequence of his very conception of spiritual exercises.

However, Hadot’s project stops precisely here, and he does not deploy the same kind of historical analysis to present conditions as to the ancient, even as he shows us quite clearly what such an analysis would need to look like.

Chapter 2. Georges Friedmann: From the Great Disequilibrium to the Interior Effort.

Georges Friedmann in some sense picks up where Hadot leaves off. His sociological studies of labor conditions and technological change over the course of the 20th century, when put into context with his political-philosophical reflections, amount to precisely the form of analyses that the confluence of Hadot's own methods and goals necessarily calls for.

However, through his lifelong commitment to Marxism, direct sociological methodologies, and specific philosophical commitments, I engage Friedmann's work to draw out several other consequences which are at best implicit in Hadot: First, that what Friedmann and Hadot call "spiritual demands" are also, necessarily, material and political demands. Second, Friedmann allows us to see that, again as a consequence of Hadot's own project, any attempt to articulate or analyze properly contemporary forms of spiritual exercise is itself a necessarily political project.

Friedmann thus provides a uniquely rich and complex model of what any investigation of properly contemporary "spiritual demands" would need to look like. Indeed, Friedmann's entire career can be read as an astoundingly thorough preparatory analysis of those very conditions. He further provides an exceedingly clear understanding that what may seem to be merely "ethical," "spiritual," or "individual" attempts to address those demands are themselves forms of political work on the level of groups, systems, and structures.

Chapter 3. Michel Foucault: From the Analytics of Power to the Care of the Self

Or "On the Politics of Ethics"

Chapter 3 begins with what amounts to a detailed argument regarding the coherence of Michel Foucault's philosophical project, although it may at first seem methodologically

circuitous. Specifically, I will argue that the very notion of the care of the self, of Foucault's "ethical" material proceeds directly and in fully coherent ways from the "analytics of power" of the early to mid-1970s, perhaps the most well-known period of his work.

My goal here is not simply to dispel some of the historically poor readings of Foucault's "ethical turn," especially those which emerged prior to the publication of the *Collège de France* lectures which charged Foucault with a kind of determinism, and those more recently baffling and irresponsible accounts which claim that Foucault was somehow "seduced" by neo-liberalism. These Foucauldian exegetical issues are in fact important to the elaboration of this project in their own right, as the ways in which I draw on the resources provided in these texts will depend for their success and coherence on the clarification of my reading of Foucault.

However, far more importantly and concretely for the ultimate success of this project, to show how the ethics of the care of the self emerges from the analytics of power will be an essential step in the elaboration of a non-reductive theorization of the relationship between ethical and political life. It will also allow us a much greater level of clarity with regard to both the finer contours and stakes of the category of practices of self-overcoming. Finally, it will allow us to draw far clearer lines between both of these questions, the twin drivers of this work as a whole.

Chapter 4. The Practice of Dignity: Martin Luther King Jr., Self-purification, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott

This final chapter allows us to fully re-approach the twin questions with which we began—What exactly do we mean when we talk about "spiritual exercises?" And how can

properly ethical work on the self be construed in genuinely political terms? —on the other side of the theoretical tools developed in the two previous chapters.

Roughly, I proceed as follows:

1) I will begin with an analysis of the system of legal segregation and an argument that a kind of political “repressive hypothesis” understood in purely juridical terms is insufficient to account for both the effectiveness of the system and more simply the way it seemed to operate logistically on a day to day basis; followed by:

2) An analysis of various reports and discussions of the psychological, physical and spiritual effects of the system of legal segregation on African American subjects, leading into an argument of the role of these effects in the apparatus of the system itself.

These two points will then be used alongside some of the theoretical materials developed in previous chapters to provide a more robust account of how something like legal segregation “worked” in the strict technical sense. If successful, *that* analysis will provide the precise kernel we will need in order to develop a more robust argument regarding the relationship between ethical and political life that begins to approximate the kind of reciprocal relationship between the two that Frederic Gros, for example, attributes to Foucault in *The Courage of the Truth*.

From here, we will then be in a position to continue the analysis of the boycott movement itself. I should note that this is *not* intended to be a historically “causal” account of a series of events, but rather a kind of pragmatic account of “how something works.” That “something” is in this case the political role of certain directed and organized practices of self-overcoming, and the way in which *those practices mediate the relationship of individual to group*. This larger analysis and argument will occur through the integrated analyses of several of the constituent events of

the boycott: the practice of walking to work, the organization of large groups of people, training to manage fear and engage in direct action, the role of churches and religious institutions, etc.

One consequence of the form that this work will take will be the clarification of the ways in which certain practices that would not intuitively be placed under the rubric of the care of the self may indeed be analyzed as such. Finally, this more explicitly historical-philosophical work should allow us to arrive at a satisfactory robustness in terms of the larger theoretical development that is the task of this dissertation as a whole. We should end with at least one vision of the ways in which the care of the self, the care of the other, the care of *ourselves* and the care of the community variously understood, may exist in some kind of irreducible reciprocity. Such a conception will be formally immune to charges of spiritualism and moralism, and thus provide both a model and standard for adjudicating the political consequences not simply of the kinds of practices of ethical self-overcoming that immediately concern me here, but that larger category, including religious practices, as a whole.

Conclusion: On the Political Philosophy of Self-Overcoming

This dissertation concludes with a critical reading of Martha Nussbaum's recent liberal, political-theoretical accounts of the concept of "self-purification" in King and within nonviolent direct action more broadly.⁴⁰ While Nussbaum laudably reads figures like King and Gandhi as philosophers and constructive thinkers in their own right, her approach is insufficient for two reasons that are instructively relevant to my own project:

⁴⁰ See Martha Nussbaum, "From Anger to Love: Self-purification and Political Resistance," in *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. Brandon M. Terry Tommie Shelby (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), and the Conclusion below.

First, Nussbaum artificially constrains King within the boundaries of a standard form of political liberalism. Her reading thus makes King beholden to political commitments that he did not explicitly share, and which do not reflect the material struggles in which King and others were engaged. The result is a surprisingly thin reconstruction of “self-purification” as *solely* a therapeutics of anger, and a description of an ideal, anger-less state. Here, the status of shame, fear, the cultivation of dignity, *or* of practical skills constitutive of protest—let alone the complex relationship between them—are simply absent. Much more importantly, any question of how one achieves that state—a question that I have demonstrated is necessarily central to King—is reduced to an afterthought at best.

Second, her approach results not simply in an inaccurate understanding of King, but evinces a strong, politically salient, demonstration of the dangers and inadequacies of the form of philosophy with which Hadot, for example, takes such issue. She approaches King both methodologically and conceptually within the very methods of standard contemporary academic philosophy that Hadot, for example, critiques in Chapter 1: that is, as a source of *concepts* that are here divorced from *practices*. Both concrete spiritual demands and practices of self-change that co-constitute “self-purification” are thus reduced to an afterthought at best. Moreover, even if Nussbaum does consider the *practice* of self-purification worth considering in some venue, what matters is that practices of self-change *are not understood to make methodological demands on the way in which philosophy is practiced or defined*.

The combined result of these two factors within Nussbaum’s reading is a reduction of self-purification to what I call a kind of free-standing *telos* (and a historically and conceptually inaccurate one in this case). In this way, the *state* of being anger-less is represented as an ideal in itself, disconnected from the concrete historical forms of material and spiritual demand that give

rise to such a *telos*, and more importantly the forms of practice that bring one to it. Thus, by treating the practical aspects of self-purification as an exercise of self-change as an afterthought at best, she radically misconstrues the concept itself. As Hadot, Friedmann, Foucault, and King, perhaps above all, show us, we cannot treat practices merely as concepts.

This critical reading of Nussbaum is, however, taken up to the explicitly positive end of demonstrating what a politics of self-overcoming, as I articulate it here, has to offer both conceptually and methodologically, to philosophy and political theory. The example of Nussbaum's liberal reading, as the articulation of a freestanding ethical *telos*, is meant here to demonstrate what one necessarily misses—and what one must necessarily elide—in even the most sophisticated attempts to address these questions from a strictly philosophical (or political-theoretical) approach. I use this contrast to demonstrate that rather than beginning from an ideal and asking how to achieve it practically, we may instead begin “from the middle” as it were. Rather than asking “What does the good look like?” as a generalized, universal model—as Nussbaum treats self-purification—we can instead begin with the question of how, by what practices, in what ways, may we change ourselves? At very least, it is clear that we cannot decouple practices of self-change from the ideal states to which they are meant to bring us—they are linked, as I show here, inextricably and dialectically. In brief: The question of how we get there has direct consequences for the question of where it is we wish to go.

I conclude, finally, by suggesting that the consequences of that shift in focus are quite radical, even if they are only gestured at here. My goal is not to explore those consequences in detail, as that would be the work of a proper study in its own right. It is instead to provide the groundwork necessary for the shift in focus suggested here to be understood as a live option in both study and practice.

Chapter 1.

Pierre Hadot: Ancient Spiritual Exercises and Contemporary Spiritual Demands.

“Thus the human being can never be *holy, but of course* [one can be] *virtuous*. For virtue consists precisely in *self-overcoming*.”

—Kant, Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion¹

I. Introduction

I.i. Consumed by Worries, Torn by Passions

In both the final remarks of “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse,” his inaugural address as chair of the History of Hellenistic and Roman Thought at the *Collège de France* on February 18, 1983, and the opening of the representative essay “Spiritual Exercises,” Pierre Hadot cites a passage that appears toward the end of Georges Friedmann’s *La Puissance et la Sagesse*, and which is dated 3 August, 1942:

Take flight each day! At least for a moment, however brief, as long as it is intense. Each day a ‘spiritual exercise,’—either alone or in the company of another who also wishes to become better. Spiritual exercises. Step out of duration. *Struggle* to rid yourself of your passions and vanities, the hunger for talk about your name (which, from time to time, can itch like a chronic illness). Avoid gossip, and abandon pity and hatred. Love all free human beings. Become eternal by transcending yourself. This interior effort is necessary; this ambition is just. Many are those who are entirely absorbed in militant politics, in preparation for social Revolution. Rare, very rare, are those who, in order to prepare for the revolution, wish to become worthy of it.²

In “Spiritual Exercises,” following this citation, Hadot remarks that, “with the exception of the last few lines,” this passage could well be “a pastiche of Marcus Aurelius,” and speculates that Friedmann had not been “aware of the resemblance.”³ Hadot further wonders why Friedmann,

¹ Emmanuel Kant, “Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion,” in *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 409.

² Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 359-60, my translation. This passage appears in Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” 70, 81. However, within the same English volume, the translated text appears with some not insignificant differences. I have thus re-translated it in order to render the language, and content, more in line with the other translations of Friedmann’s text that appear throughout this project, and thus with my understanding of his work. Hadot also invokes this passage, and Friedmann, again in passing, in conversation with Arnold Davidson; see Hadot et al., *The present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, 93.

³ Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” 81.

did not “ask himself about value of the philosophical tradition of Greco-Roman antiquity” in his attempt to “re-source himself,” after coming to the conclusion “that there is no tradition—be it Jewish, Christian, or Oriental—compatible with contemporary spiritual demands.”⁴

Hadot poses this question of Friedmann due to a philosophical affinity that begins with the invocation of the idea of spiritual exercises.⁵ But where Friedmann’s concerns sit squarely in the present, Hadot emphasizes that the very idea of spiritual exercise is rooted in and determined by those forms of life particular to the ancient philosophical schools of Greece and Rome. So despite this shared philosophical affinity, and indeed a shared concern with addressing properly contemporary “spiritual demands,” it is for Hadot, by definition, to the ancient world that we must return, and with which we must begin.

In “Spiritual Exercises,” following his invocation of Friedmann, Hadot charts the notion of *Exercitia spiritualia* back through Ignatius of Loyola to the early Latin Christian tradition, the corresponding Greek Christian concept of *askesis*, and finally to the philosophical world of classical antiquity, where he argues *askesis* “must be understood not as asceticism, but as the practice of spiritual exercises.”⁶ And despite an extensive Catholic education,⁷ it is not to

⁴ Ibid. I will bracket for the time being the many questions and problems that arise around the generalized language that Hadot uses to describe the latter grouping of traditions

⁵ By this term, Hadot means, as we have already seen, “voluntary, personal practices intended to bring about a transformation of the individual, a transformation of the self.” Hadot et al., *The present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, 87.

⁶ Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” 82.

⁷ Pierre Hadot was born in Paris on February 21, 1922, to a pious mother and a father who, for personal reasons, became disillusioned with the church. Nonetheless, Hadot had what he refers to as a “holy water childhood” in Reims, educated by priests in varying religious institutions (Hadot et al., *The present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, 4-5.). According to the wishes of his mother, Hadot followed his two older brothers into the seminary (in this case the Grand Séminaire of Reims), which he entered in 1937, and was ordained in 1944. Following an increasing recognition of a philosophical gap between his own views and church dogma (including and especially the publication of Pope Pius XII’s encyclical *Humani Generis* on August 12, 1950 and the proclamation of the Dogma of Assumption on November 1 of that year), and a desire to marry, Hadot left the priesthood in June of 1952 (ibid., 22.). Though his relationship with the church was complex, Hadot is clear about the central role that his religious education played in the philosophical and philological education that would serve as the foundations of his career. (See Chapter 1, “Tied to the Apron Strings of the Church” in ibid., for a more detailed description of Hadot’s intellectual autobiography.)

Ignatius of Loyola, nor even to the Christian tradition that Hadot looks to understand the class of practices called spiritual exercises. Instead, Hadot is adamant that even “Loyola’s *Exercitia spiritualia* were deeply rooted in the exercises of ancient philosophy”⁸ and that “in the final analysis, it is to antiquity that we must return in order to explain the origin and significance of this idea of spiritual exercises, which, as Friedmann shows, is still alive in contemporary consciousness.”⁹

Building off of his invocation of Friedmann, Hadot’s stated goals in “Spiritual Exercises” (and indeed throughout his career) are “to delimit the scope and importance of the phenomenon [in Greco-Roman antiquity], and to show the consequences which it entails for the understanding not only of ancient thought, but of philosophy itself”¹⁰—including contemporary philosophy and contemporary life. On Hadot’s account, to understand ancient philosophy without a notion of spiritual exercise is to not understand ancient philosophy at all, nor philosophy in general.

But my goal here is neither to make Hadot’s case regarding the nature of philosophy for him, nor to endorse the view of ancient philosophical practice that he puts forward. Rather it is to understand Hadot himself as a philosopher, and to specify the mechanics, limits, and consequences of his own views on the concept of spiritual exercises. To do that, we must of course understand his claims about ancient intellectual-spiritual life, but we must, at least for analytical purposes, distinguish them from those of the ancient authors that he discusses.

Conversion. For Hadot, the change that one undergoes through ongoing spiritual exercise is not merely a modification of one’s beliefs, nor the comprehension of some idea,

⁸ Hadot, “Ancient Spiritual Exercises and ‘Christian Philosophy,’” 126. Elsewhere, he puts this in much stronger terms: “Ignatius’ *Exercitia spiritualia* are nothing but a Christian version of a Greco-Roman tradition.” (“Spiritual Exercises,” 82.)

⁹ “Spiritual Exercises,” 82.

¹⁰ Ibid.

however complex or challenging: “we are not dealing with mere knowledge, but with the transformation of our personality.”¹¹ This is perhaps the most important difference, in his view, between ancient and contemporary philosophical practice. In fact, if the modifier “spiritual” denotes anything distinctive, it is precisely this capacity for and depth of transformation:

“As we can glimpse through Friedmann’s text, these exercises in fact correspond to a transformation of our vision of the world, and to a metamorphosis of our personality. 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. Above all, the word ‘spiritual’ reveals the true dimensions of these exercises. By means of them, the individual raises himself up to the life of the objective Spirit; that is to say, he re-replaces himself within the perspective of the Whole (‘Become eternal by transcending yourself’).¹²

In fact, the changes in question are so fundamental that Hadot describes them in the language of *conversion*:

The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and 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.¹³

Or, as he says further on, “the same thing happens in every spiritual exercise: we must *let* ourselves be changed.”¹⁴

The Diagnosis of Human Disquiet. Hadot insists that among the ancients, *all* philosophical practice is marked in some way by spiritual exercises, which were ubiquitous. And although “each school has its...method,” and despite the “richness and variety of the practice of spiritual exercises in antiquity,” on a level more basic than “this apparent diversity...there is a profound unity, both in the means employed and in the ends pursued,”¹⁵ as well as in the motivations for which one would take up such practices. On his reading, “All schools also agree

¹¹ Ibid., 85.

¹² Ibid., 82.

¹³ Ibid., 83, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Ibid., 91.

¹⁵ Ibid., 101.

that man, before his philosophical conversion, is in a state of unhappy disquiet. Consumed by worries, torn by passions, he does not live a genuine life, nor is he truly himself.”¹⁶ But, he continues, “all schools also agree that man can be delivered from this state. He can accede to genuine life, improve himself, transform himself, and attain a state of perfection”¹⁷ through philosophical practice. The central goal of all spiritual exercise, and of the philosophical way of life, is thus “precisely to bring about this transformation.”¹⁸

A Kind of Work. Of course, “Such a transformation of vision is not easy, and it is precisely here that spiritual exercises come in. Little by little, they make possible the indispensable metamorphosis of our inner self.”¹⁹ Thus ancient philosophy “did not consist in teaching an abstract theory—much less in the exegesis of texts—but rather the art of living. It is a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence”²⁰ meant to mitigate our unhappy disquiet. The ancient schools thus provided more than a conceptual framework or system of understanding, but instead an entire “way of life”²¹ comprised of spiritual exercises meant to transform practicing subjects. Thus, as Hadot argues, if contemporary philosophy is wholly defined by the discursive and the conceptual, for the ancients “the parts of philosophy were not only theoretical discourses, but exercise themes, which had to be practiced concretely if one wanted to live as a philosopher.”²²

The Figure of the Sage. The state of perfection, the “genuine life” in which one is “truly oneself”—whatever the concepts of “truth,” “one,” or “self” might mean—was often personified

¹⁶ Ibid., 102.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 83.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Indeed, in the ancient context, as Hadot describes it, the schools were “ways of life” *insofar as they were organized as schools*, or, even in the case of the Cynics, by virtue of *rejecting* the organizational structure of the schools, and choosing to live philosophically in plain sight, as it were.

²² Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 135.

by the schools in an ideal figure, in the form of the sage. Generally speaking, the sage was both modeled on the ideal principles of school and embodied those principles. Thus each school “will elaborate its rational depiction of this state of perfection in the person of the sage, and each will make an effort to portray him.”²³ The sage personifies that ideal state in which suffering no longer holds sway, even as the understanding of what it means for the causes of our suffering to “hold sway” could differ from school to school. The same is true for the ways in which those causes were understood to mark the daily lives of normal people *and* the life of the sage. Thus in some views, given foundational troubles are still present within the perfected state, and the sage has simply learned to live with them. In other cases, such problems may no longer “exist” in some way, because they are the products of our own ignorance, which the sage has vanquished.

Perfectionism. However, because the ideal of the sage “represented absolute perfection, which admits of no degrees,”²⁴ it was often understood to be just that, an ideal. Though coterminous with the philosophical ideals of a school or tradition, the model that one aspired to emulate, the sage could be taken as neither a living (or even deceased) exemplar, nor even a practically or realistically attainable state:

It is true that this transcendental ideal will be deemed almost inaccessible; according to some schools there never was a wise man, while others say that perhaps there were one or two of them, such as Epicurus, this god among men, and still others maintain that man can only attain this state during rare, fleeting moments. In this transcendent norm established by reason, each school will express its own vision of the world, its own style of life, and its idea of the perfect man.”²⁵

The pursuit of this ideal was thus a form of moral, spiritual, or philosophical perfectionism, and an explicit one at that. Although the practitioner devotes a lifetime to its pursuit, “the philosopher also knows that this wisdom is an ideal state, almost inaccessible.”²⁶ Nonetheless, “the

²³ “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy,” 57.

²⁴ *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 49.

²⁵ “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy,” 57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

philosophical life will be an effort to live and think according to the norm of wisdom, it will be a movement, a progression, though a never-ending one, toward this transcendent state.”²⁷

There were then, it seems, no illusions that the value of the sage lay not so much in its attainability, but in its ability to crystalize the teachings of the school in a perfected model. The sage thus served as an embodiment of what Foucault calls the *telos*²⁸ toward which the philosopher would strive, and against which progress could be measured. Conversely however, there were also no illusions regarding the concrete reality of the spiritual demands which the ideal states of sagacity and wisdom were meant to redress. Thus, despite the many differences among the schools in their descriptions of either of these poles, “Each school, then, represents a form of life defined by an ideal of wisdom,”²⁹ personified in the sage, and dialectally formulated in response to a diagnosis of the causes of our unhappy state.

Spiritual Exercises. Understood in this way, the ancient schools did not simply recognize human suffering as a philosophical problem, but rather acknowledged it as *the* philosophical problem. But they also offered a solution, in the form of a perhaps now unfamiliar conception of philosophy, which is, Hadot says, “a spiritual exercise because it is a mode of life, a form of life, and a choice of life.”³⁰ The ideal state of resolution, attainable in this life or not,

²⁷ Ibid., 59.

²⁸ In the “Genealogy of Ethics,” Foucault asks “Which is the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way? For instance, shall we become pure, or immortal, or free, or masters of ourselves, and so on? So that’s what I call the telos [*téléologie*]. In what we call morals, there is the effective behavior of people, there are the codes, there is this kind of relationship to oneself with the above four aspects.” (Foucault, “On The Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of a Work in Progress,” 265. Foucault also elaborates this concept in *The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, 28. I will follow Foucault in using this term, *telos*, throughout the present work and in all cases, to refer to whatever ideals one works toward when working upon oneself through practices of ethical self-change, though I will sometimes simply refer to the telos in the simple language of “goals” or “aims.” In this case, the figure of the sage is a personification of the philosophical *telos* of the school, though a set of unpersonified ideal principles can serve the same role, as can the idea of the next life in varying religious contexts, etc.

²⁹ Hadot, “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy,” 59.

³⁰ Hadot et al., *The present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, 93.

was of course approached through “exercises designed to ensure spiritual progress toward the ideal state of wisdom, exercises of reason that will be, for the soul, analogous to the athlete’s training or to the application of a medical cure.”³¹ It is in this way that, for Hadot, philosophy is ultimately “a therapeutics,” by which “we must concern ourselves with the healing of our own lives,” through the practice of spiritual exercises, which are, unequivocally, “required for the healing of the soul.”³²

Like Friedmann, Hadot does not simply feel an intellectual affinity for a vision of philosophy conceived in this way. Something, after all, is indeed always wrong, and it is entirely possible, he argues, that ancient philosophical exercises may still have something to offer us in understanding, mitigating, and healing the particular troubles that mark contemporary life. The question is of course, for the ancients as for us, what exactly it means to “heal our own lives.”

I.ii. Contemporary Spiritual Demands

Hadot’s oeuvre, his lifework, devoted to the explication and elaboration of ancient spiritual exercises, is expansive in both its historical breadth and its contributions to the re-assessment of philosophy both ancient and modern. Hadot has also done more than anyone to re-introduce and motivate contemporary discussions of practices of self-change, both through his influence on Foucault and in his own work. And for all that, Hadot is clear that his is not a merely historical project, a way of setting the historical record straight regarding the nature of philosophy in the ancient world—nor even an intervention internal to contemporary academic philosophy. Rather, it is also marked and motivated by the explicitly prescriptive project of

³¹ Hadot, “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy,” 59.

³² “Spiritual Exercises,” 87.

providing answers to “those who, like Friedmann, ask themselves the question: how is it possible to practice spiritual exercises in the twentieth century?”³³ It is a prescriptive concern that he also recognizes in the late work of Michel Foucault, whose “description of the practices of the self—like, moreover, my description of spiritual exercises—is not merely an historical study, but rather a tacit attempt to offer contemporary mankind a model of life.”³⁴

This prescriptive project is closely tied to the properly “descriptive” historical work that constitutes the bulk of Hadot’s written oeuvre. Jeannie Carlier, in her introductory remarks to *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, describes the two threads within Hadot’s work in this way:

There is a discrepancy between the two projects—on the one hand, to inform the reader of a set of facts that show, without much possible argument, that for the Greeks philosophy was not the construction of a system, but a choice of life; and, on the other, to discretely ‘turn’ this reader toward philosophy understood in this sense....Rather than telling people to ‘do this,’ he says, invoking Kierkegaard’s ‘method of indirect communication,’ one can ‘thanks to the description of a spiritual experience lived by another [...], let the reader glimpse and suggest a spiritual attitude, let [them] hear a call....’³⁵

On Carlier’s reading here, Hadot seeks to “form as he informs.” According to her, he hopes that in and through his historical-philosophical readings of ancient texts, his readers will “hear a call,” one that will somehow draw them toward the practice of spiritual exercises.

And yet, Carlier’s description of a “discrepancy” between “two projects” is quite misleading. Far from a “discrepancy,” we have instead a complex and subtle point of intersection between two deeply intertwined threads within Hadot’s writing. That juncture is also a site of productive tension, even as it has not yet been fully explored. And it is for that reason that I take the intersection of Hadot’s descriptive and prescriptive projects as my point of departure here.

³³ Ibid., 108.

³⁴ Ibid., 208.

³⁵ Hadot et al., *The present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, xv.

But perhaps there is a “discrepancy” after all: not within Hadot’s project itself, but in the ways in which it is possible for that work to be received. It is certainly possible for secondary discussions of Hadot to focus solely on the descriptive project, even despite themselves, for at least two reasons. On the one hand, any reading of Hadot invariably takes place within the contemporary academic setting that he argues holds no place for philosophy as “a way of life.” On the other, despite Hadot’s departure from some of the standard frameworks of contemporary philosophy, his work still remains in some part within the domain of recognizably philosophical and philological pursuits. After all, Hadot’s very interest in spiritual exercises as a concept emerges from more familiar problems of textual exegesis and philosophical interpretation, and he clearly engages the metaphysical, ethical, and rational commitments of ancient thinkers. His writing does consist of claims and arguments—in this case about the nature, context, content, and role of philosophy in antiquity—which can be assessed and adjudicated using the familiar armature of contemporary academic philosophy. In other words, insofar as Hadot’s work and the responses to it are ultimately comprised of the interpretation of texts, the critical analysis of concepts and claims—regardless of the *content* of those claims—this work still remains within the familiar and recognizable bounds of contemporary philosophical practice to some extent.

This point is simple enough, though it can be obscured, and for good reason. Hadot’s project situates seemingly familiar philosophical pursuits (reading, writing, dialogue, physical and metaphysical speculation, and so on) within the larger category of practices he calls spiritual exercises. He further argues that those familiar philosophical activities were taken up within certain historical contexts to ends either unrecognizable or recognizably uncomfortable to contemporary academic philosophy. It is for this reason that Hadot’s descriptive project, in both its presentation and reception, ultimately remains so squarely embedded within those forms of

modern philosophical practice that he demonstrates have wandered from their ancient forebears. And it is for these same reasons that Hadot's descriptive project may remain the center of academic attention to his work, even if only by the default ways in which it is approached. We can ask, after all, using *our* methods whether Hadot is "right" about the ancient world, or whether his claims about the composition of the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius hold up to historical and philosophical scrutiny, among many other examples.

Conversely, the prescriptive aspect of his work may appear anywhere on an interpretive spectrum of absurd and anachronistic, to obvious and thus lacking any real need for detailed attention. In the case of the former, it is not difficult to imagine charges of "spiritualism"³⁶ and unrigor leveled at Hadot's work. In the case of the latter, it can appear easy to claim to know what Hadot means by spiritual exercises, and how to go about practicing them. If, after all, the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius were nothing more than a kind of journal, what could be more familiar, and easier to adopt into our own daily lives, even at a distance of centuries? Doesn't Hadot himself suggest as much in his question to Friedmann? Death is *the* universal human experience—can we not learn something about how to face it, in ways that are directly applicable to our own lives, from the ancient thinkers in question? Aren't spiritual exercises in one form or another recognizably ubiquitous in contemporary cultures, including our own? And if so, is it not simply a question of adding those that Hadot has introduced to one's "repertoire," as it were?

Both of these sets of assumptions are at once misguided and highly productive for the project at hand, though for reasons that must be carefully delimited. And yet, it must be clear that my own project in no way consists in a direct response to either: I do not argue for the coherence

³⁶ With of course the attending political charges of moralism closely in tow, for those who are concerned to pose those particular questions.

or inaccuracy of Hadot's readings of the ancient texts, as I am neither qualified to nor interested in doing so. Nor do will this chapter make any claims assessing the *value* of Hadot's thoughts on practicing spiritual exercises in the present, and will instead take that aspect of his work as just that—an important aspect of his work that must be properly situated within his larger overall project. Any *general* reflections on what I have called the “value” of properly contemporary practices of self-overcoming can and will only be addressed in my discussion of King, in Chapter Four below.

Instead, my goal in this chapter is to excavate, clarify, and analyze Hadot's own philosophical commitments, as they are woven through and revealed by his treatment of ancient spiritual-philosophical life. In other words, this chapter aims to say very little about antiquity, and only a little about the present, and to instead say a great deal about *Hadot*, his own concerns and philosophical project, *through* his discussions of ancient spiritual exercises. I do not, however, approach this goal by continuing the practice of solely engaging Hadot's descriptive project, and setting the prescriptive impulse to one side. Instead, I take that impulse within Hadot's work seriously, placing it at the center, rather than at the periphery, of my reading. As unexplored as they are in secondary literature on Hadot, and as undeveloped as they are in his own texts, I argue that his prescriptive claims have yet-unspecified consequences for both his understanding of the ancients *and* his more general philosophical commitments.

In other words, if Hadot can ask why Friedmann does *not* look to the ancients, we may just as easily ask why he believes that he *can* and that we *should*. On the one hand, there may be something fundamental in Friedmann's work in *La puissance* that Hadot has either missed, or at least underappreciated, regarding the specificity and import of the term “contemporary” as it is

used there, as a modifier of both “spiritual exercises” and “spiritual demands.”³⁷ On the other hand, I argue that it is also a *necessary* concern for Hadot, as a consequence of an implicit thread within his “descriptive” work regarding the relationship between spiritual exercises and the “spiritual demands” that they are meant to address. For this reason, I will lean heavily on this question of what the term “contemporary” means or could mean here, in order to motivate the lines of questioning I want to explore both in this chapter and in this larger project.

To be clear, I am not so much concerned with identifying forms of contemporary spiritual exercise, as I am with understanding the *methods* by which such forms would need to be understood, identified, and determined. Indeed, if my first goal in this chapter is to introduce Hadot himself, I do so in the service of the second: to bring to light certain productive tensions that arise between what I am calling his prescriptive project and the general logic or structure of spiritual exercises throughout his oeuvre. This will in turn allow me to clearly identify the limits of Hadot’s larger project, the place in which his own work seems to end, just as it poses a series of questions the answers to which Hadot himself only gestures toward.

Although Hadot is motivated by an interest in offering forms of ancient spiritual exercise to contemporary spiritual demands, he only very partially explains what that would look like in a handful of instances. I argue however that Hadot’s analyses of ancient spiritual exercises provide precisely the formal model required to develop methods capable of either translating ancient spiritual exercises into our own context, or develop or recognize properly contemporary forms of spiritual exercise—even as Hadot does not take up this work himself. These latter questions can actually be understood to reduce to the more general problem of the emergence of new forms of spiritual exercise in any context. For that reason we must first address the general question of

³⁷ I explore this question in Chapter 2 below.

how to specify the formal criteria that would allow us to determine the appropriateness and potential efficacy of spiritual exercises in any time and place, and thus under the conditions of any “spiritual demand.” Indeed, the general framework—or at least the beginnings of one—required to understand the applicability of a given practice or regimen to a given context is implicit within Hadot’s approach to the ancient texts. I argue that the foundations of that method are to be found specifically within the analysis of the practical-philosophical coherence and integrity of the three poles of 1) the philosophical diagnosis of given “spiritual demands;” 2) spiritual exercises themselves; and 3) the *telos*, or ideal principles (represented by the figure of the sage), within the ancient schools.

However and again, even though Hadot acknowledges the impossibility of simply introducing practices and concepts from one historical context to another without some reliable method of doing so, he himself stops short of explicitly articulating any such method. He simply does not take that next step of showing us just what the preliminary analysis and concrete specification of the forms that any properly contemporary regimen of spiritual exercises would have to look like. Moreover, I argue that the few examples that Hadot provides of spiritual exercises in the present do not, in fact, meet the criteria that I reconstruct from his work, and thereby fail to meet his own implicit standards. In other words, it is quite possible that Hadot cannot fully answer his own question to Friedmann, at least not without the kind of exhaustive analysis of contemporary conditions *necessarily entailed* by his own work—precisely the kind that we will see evinced by Friedmann himself in Chapter 2.

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The question of contemporary spiritual exercises is thus much more central to Hadot's project than it may seem. However, he ultimately leaves the task of answering it to others (whether he does so intentionally is simply not worth speculating). This is not necessarily a flaw on Hadot's part: to say that his oeuvre is detailed, precise, and methodical would be an understatement, and it is a testament to that work, or any work, that it raises new questions. We can ask, however, what the consequences of Hadot's descriptive work are for his own prescriptive goals, and vice-versa. In other words, how can or should his historical understanding of spiritual exercises inform the possible contours of practices taken up in times and places radically different from those of their origin?

This question serves as both motivation and guiding thread in my investigations of Hadot. And it has great implications for the larger questions already outlined in the Introduction: First, that of the theorization of the emergence of new practices, which we will only begin to treat here; Second, and in turn, that of the possibility of a proper politics of self-overcoming, to which later chapters will be more precisely devoted. The former questions will allow us to understand the broader category of practices of the self more fully, by identifying fundamental problems that the later must answer. Indeed, it is in no small part because this productive tension has such wide-ranging consequences that I have chosen to begin this project with Hadot.

In order to properly motivate either of these lines of investigation, and to contextualize them appropriately, we must begin with a more general sense of what we mean when we talk about spiritual exercises in the first place. And if the broader issues I want to pursue here emerge specifically from a reading of Hadot, then it is with Hadot's rich and unparalleled investigations of ancient spiritual exercises that we must begin.

II. Ancient Spiritual Exercises

Despite the difficulties inherent in the textual record,³⁸ Hadot exhaustively elaborates the spiritual exercises and forms of life taken up by an enormous range of ancient philosophical practitioners. Due to the breadth and depth of Hadot's lifelong engagement with ancient spiritual exercises this discussion is limited to some of Hadot's own most privileged examples. Among those examples, and thus among all of the traditions and practices that Hadot discussed, he found what he called a "profound unity" within the "apparent diversity."³⁹ This unity is not so much a doctrinal universalism—though the schools do share many things in common—but rather a formal feature of spiritual exercises as a coherent category. For Hadot, this commonality begins, as we have already seen, with the idea of exercises taken up to bring about a transformation of the practitioner, however those terms are construed. But there is another commonality evinced across Hadot's writings, though never explicitly identified. This is the formal relationship between the diagnoses of human suffering proffered by different schools, the *telos* that each presents as their resolution, and the specificity of the exercises that each would take up to bridge them. In all cases, for reasons that are as logical as they are empirical, these three poles are

³⁸ The problem of the textual record is in no way specific to particular schools, and stands as an ongoing challenge to our ability to understand ancient spiritual-philosophical practice. Of the philosophical life in the Hellenistic period for example, Hadot notes that "we know it only imperfectly, and we would have a very different idea of it if all the philosophical works written during that period had been preserved for us." (Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 95.) In "Spiritual Exercises," Hadot reminds us that, of ancient practices in general, "no systematic treatise codifying the instructions and techniques has come down to us. However, allusions to one or the other of such inner activities are very frequent in the writings of the Roman and Hellenistic periods. It thus appears that these exercises were well known, and that it was enough to allude to them, since they were part of daily life in the philosophical schools. They took their place within a traditional course of oral instruction." ("Spiritual Exercises," 84.) In *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Hadot is more specific about the difficulties particular to ancient Stoicism in this regard: "Because we have lost most of the writings of Zeno and Chrysippus, the founders of the [Stoic] sect, we have far fewer testimonies on the spiritual exercises practiced in the Stoic school than on the exercises practiced by the Epicureans. The most interesting reports are those of Cicero, Philo of Alexandria, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius; they are relatively late but probably draw on a previous tradition, which we can see traces of in some fragments by Chrysippus and even by Zeno." (*What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 135.)

³⁹ "Spiritual Exercises," 101.

intimately linked, mutually determinative, and in some sense responsible for the great diversity within the unity of the category of spiritual exercise.

This observation is, on its own, completely uncontroversial, and may seem an exceedingly simple point. And yet it actually allows us to understand some of the difficulties produced by Hadot's own prescriptive project, the question of translating ancient spiritual exercises into a contemporary context, and just what Hadot means by "spiritual exercises" in the first place. Indeed, a productive tension arises at the juncture of this formal structure and what I refer to as the prescriptive aspect of Hadot's project. That tension allows us to reconstruct the implicit method that Hadot provides for understanding spiritual exercises beyond the ancient context. One goal of this chapter is to bring that tension and that implicit methodological framework to light. And in order to do that, we must turn to the details of Hadot's treatments of ancient philosophical exercise.

Throughout his oeuvre, the Stoics, one of the dogmatic schools of the Hellenistic period stand among Hadot's most privileged examples. Indeed, the sheer volume of both comparative and independent analysis devoted to the school and its more famous members (Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius), reflects what Davidson describes as Hadot's "subtle but significant displacement of his philosophical sympathies from Neoplatonism to Epicureanism and especially Stoicism."⁴⁰ Davidson also notes that this shift is in fact the result of "Hadot's recognition of and increasing philosophical concern with the realities of everyday life,"⁴¹ which dovetails explicitly with his concern to offer up a philosophy that is not just a way of life, but a properly contemporary way of life. For that reason, and for the sake of concision, I remain within the

⁴⁰ Hadot et al., *The present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, xi.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

general framework of the Hellenistic schools, beginning with Hadot's treatment of the Stoics, as a way to frame and structure the formal elements of Hadot's understanding that I want to highlight.

II.i. The Hellenistic Schools

The philosophical schools of the Hellenistic period are representative for Hadot in no small part because they evince both the diversity and unity of ancient spiritual exercises. Regarding their overlap, Hadot notes that "At first glance, in fact, one might wonder if the conceptions of wisdom were really all that different among the schools."⁴² Hadot continues:

Whether or not they laid claim to the Socratic heritage, all Hellenistic philosophers agreed with Socrates that human beings are plunged into misery, anguish, and evil because they exist in ignorance. Evil is to be found not within things, but in the value judgments which people bring to bear *upon* things. People can therefore be cured of their ills only if they are persuaded to change their judgements, and in this sense all these philosophies wanted to be therapeutic. In order to change our value judgements, however, we must make a radical choice to change our entire way of thinking and way of being. This choice is the choice of philosophy, and it is thanks to it that we may obtain inner tranquility and peace of mind.⁴³

They shared—along with many other traditions outside the Hellenistic context—a commitment to philosophy "as a remedy for human worries, anguish, and misery."⁴⁴

At the same time, the reasons for which we are plunged into such misery, the particular forms that our ignorance may take, were understood in fundamentally different terms across the schools. Thus "Despite these apparent similarities, deep differences may be discerned."⁴⁵ Within the Hellenistic context, our problems are brought about "for the Cynics, by social constraints and conventions; for the Epicureans, by the quest for false pleasures; for the Stoics, by the pursuit of

⁴² Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 102.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

pleasure and egoistic self-interest; and for the Skeptics, by false opinions.”⁴⁶ The doctors, then, did not pronounce the same diagnoses. And just as the basic diagnoses of human disquiet could vary greatly, the end results of such transformation could differ radically from one school to the next. Thus, much like the diagnoses, the nature and definition of “healing” differed greatly from school to school. In all cases however, the ideal that one strives toward is directly informed the philosophical diagnosis of the originary conditions from which tension and suffering are understood to arise—the “spiritual demands” one seeks to address.

As Hadot explains, these two poles are joined by a regimen of spiritual exercises that works to deliver one from suffering to a state of wisdom in which the causes of that suffering are in some way mitigated. Thus in this context,

“we must distinguish between the dogmatic schools, for whom therapeutics consisted in transforming value judgements, and the Skeptics, who wished only to suspend them. Above all, although the dogmatic schools agreed that the fundamental philosophical choice must correspond to an innate human tendency, some distinctions must be made: for Epicureanism, it was the search for pleasure which motivated all human activity; whereas for Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Stoicism, in accordance with Socratic tradition, the love of the good was the primordial instinct of human beings. Despite this fundamental identity in intention, however, these three schools were still founded upon existential choices which were radically different from one another.”⁴⁷

Therefore, in order to succeed, the specific exercises taken up must be carefully tailored to address the conditions from which one starts out *and* to deliver the practitioner to the ideal state specified (or at least something like it). In other words: the forms that spiritual exercises take are fundamentally (though not always exhaustively) determined by the spiritual demands a given school seeks to address, as well as the ideal state wherein those demands are ameliorated.

Beyond a mere generality or truism, we see the depth and complexity of this relationship in the many examples of ancient philosophical practice that Hadot describes. The Hellenistic

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 103.

schools help to demonstrate more than the simple *fact* that the different poles of the philosophical life were tied together, but rather the depth and importance—indeed, the necessity—of what Foucault calls a “unified moral conduct.”⁴⁸ I will begin, as I’ve already suggested, with the Stoic school, perhaps Hadot’s most privileged example.

II.i.a. Diagnosis.

The Stoics, as is the case for any school or system, begin with a description of the causes of human ills, the spiritual demands which motivate philosophical life. In *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Hadot describes the Stoic outlook and the fundamental principles of the school in several places, beginning with an overview of what he calls the “Stoic experience:”

The Stoic experience consists in becoming sharply aware of tragic situation of human beings, who are conditioned by fate. It would seem that we are not free at all, for it is not up to us to be beautiful, strong, healthy, or rich, to feel pleasure, or to escape suffering. All these things depend on causes which are external to us. A necessity which is inexorable and indifferent to our individual interest breaks our aspirations and our hopes; we are helpless and defenseless in the face of the accidents of life, the setbacks of fortune, illness, and death. Everything in our life escapes us. The result of this is that people are unhappy, because they passionately seek to acquire things which they cannot obtain and to flee evils which are inevitable. There is one thing, and only one, which does depend on us and which nothing can tear away from us: the will to do good and to act in conformity with reason. There is thus a radical opposition between what depends on us and can therefore be either good or bad, since it is the object of our decision, and what depends not on us, but on external causes and fate and which is therefore indifferent. The will to do good is an unbreachable fortress which everyone can construct within themselves. It is there that we can find freedom, independence, invulnerability, and that eminently Stoic value, coherence with ourselves.⁴⁹

From here, Hadot further elaborates on the “opposition between the domain of the ‘moral’ and that of the ‘indifferent,’” the fundamental Stoic distinction:

That which is moral (in other words, good or bad) depends on us, and that which does not depend on us is indifferent. The only thing that depends on us is our moral intention, or the meaning we give to events. That which does not depend on us corresponds to the necessary linkage of cause and effect—in other words, to Fate, the course of nature, or the actions of other human beings. Thus, life and death, health and sickness, pleasure and suffering, beauty and ugliness, strength and weakness, wealth and poverty, nobility and baseness, political careers—all are indifferent, because they do not depend on us. In principle, all this

⁴⁸ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, 28. See also the Introduction above, and Chapter 3.

⁴⁹ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 127.

much be indifferent to us. In other words, we should not introduce differences among them, but accept what happens as willed by fate: ‘Do not try to make things happen the way you want, but want what happens the way it happens, and you will be happy.’”⁵⁰

Here the “moral” is the domain of human freedom, and thus of culpability, and the “natural” is the domain of fate and determinism, beyond our control. “Moral evils,” are those that we bring about through our free actions, the harms that we (choose) to bring upon ourselves or others. They are unlike “natural evils,” forces of nature, accidents of fate, against which we can do nothing but prepare ourselves. This distinction determines the fundamental Stoic injunction to “give up desiring that which does not depend on us and is beyond our control, so as to attach ourselves only to what depends on us: actions which are just and in conformity with reason.”⁵¹

The problem then is that we are ignorant and unable to practically distinguish between what does and does not depend upon us. We act as though we can impact events which are by definition beyond our influence, and treat that which we can shape as we would an unyielding law of nature. Thus “mankind’s woes derive from the fact that he seeks to acquire or to keep possessions that he may either lose or fail to obtain, and from the fact that he tries to avoid misfortunes which are often inevitable.”⁵² We confuse fate and freedom, and that confusion is the source of our unhappiness.

The principles of the Epicurean school both mirror and depart from those of the Stoics in important ways. As it is for the Stoics, our unhappiness is rooted in ignorance and misjudgment, but in this case the confusion concerns the nature of desire and pleasure, rather than our relationship to moral and natural evil:

“People’s unhappiness, for the Epicureans, comes from the fact that they are afraid of things which are not to be feared, and desire things which it is not necessary to desire, and which are beyond their control.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 132.

⁵¹ Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” 86.

⁵² Ibid., 83.

Consequently, their life is consumed in worries over unjustified fears and unsatisfied desires. As a result, they are deprived of the only genuine pleasure there is: the pleasure of existing.”⁵³

This distinction, and thus Epicureanism itself, “originated in an experience and a choice. The experience was that of the ‘flesh,’ though understood not as “an anatomical part of the body, but...the subject of pleasure and pain, the individual.”⁵⁴ In other words, the “flesh” is that aspect of our being which is subject not simply to pleasure and pain, but needs and deprivations, hunger and thirst, and thus the attending forms of satisfaction which come from the satiation of those, proper, forms of desire.

But the flesh and its needs are never merely physical. Rather, “the ‘flesh’ cannot be separated from the ‘soul,’ as there is no pleasure or suffering without our being conscious of them, and that consciousness has repercussions on the ‘flesh’ in turn.”⁵⁵ It is in this way that “people’s suffering comes primarily from their empty opinions, and thus from their souls.”⁵⁶ The goal then, is to “deliver the ‘flesh’ from its suffering and thus allow it to experience pleasure,”⁵⁷ but it is precisely here that our ignorance and confusion set in:

all people’s misfortune and suffering comes from the fact that they are unaware of genuine pleasure. When they seek pleasure, they are unable to find it, because they cannot be satisfied with what they have; or they seek what is beyond their reach; or because they spoil their pleasure by constantly fearing they will lose it.⁵⁸

Rather than “seeking the only genuine pleasure, the pure pleasure of existing,” which comes from both understanding and satisfying our most basic needs, we are “tortured by ‘immense, hollow’ desires, such as those for wealth, luxury, and domination.”⁵⁹ “Tortured,” because to seek

⁵³ Ibid., 87.

⁵⁴ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 114.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 115.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 117.

such pleasures is to attempt to sate desires that can never be fulfilled. Thus the fundamental Epicurean principle consists in a distinction “between desires which are both natural and necessary, desires which are natural but not necessary, and desires which are neither natural nor necessary.”⁶⁰

The Sceptics too, “put forth, ‘out of love for human beings,’ [a] diagnostic of the causes of human unhappiness, and...proposed a remedy and curative therapy for this suffering.”⁶¹ In this case, the fundamental problem had to do with our inability to truly discern what is good and what is not. The vain pursuit of this often-impossible distinction is the source of exhaustion and frustration:

He who thinks that a thing is beautiful or ugly by nature never stops worrying. When he finds he lacks something he considers good, he imagines he is enduring the worst torments, and he hurls himself into the search for what he thinks is good. No sooner does he come to possess it, however, than he is plunged into myriad worries brought about by his being excited excessively and beyond reason. Fearing that his luck will not last, he does everything possible so that what he thinks is good will not be taken away from him.⁶²

The Sceptic, in other words, sees our disquiet as rooted in the inability, and at times impossibility, of making proper value-judgements. This inability is again rooted in ignorance, in this case the ignorance of what is actually good and what only seems that way.

These kinds of diagnoses, often based in a fundamental distinction, were not simply the purview of a few of the Hellenistic Schools. We see a similar diagnosis among the Cynics,⁶³ for the Platonists and Aristotelians, for schools and thinkers in the later Roman Imperial period, medieval Christians, and so on. Across his oeuvre, Hadot describes these primary insights across traditions and historical periods in methodical detail. Regardless of time or place, in order to so

⁶⁰ Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” 87.

⁶¹ *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 142-43.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 143.

⁶³ I do not address the Cynic school in this chapter, as I return to it in detail, including Hadot’s insights on the Cynics, in extensive detail in Chapter 3.

much as constitute a philosophical school or religious tradition, each begins with the simple observation that human beings are unhappy, and then posits a reason why. That diagnosis in turn directly informs the specification of ideal principles according to which, if properly attained, the suffering described would be either mitigated or defeated.

II.i.b Telos.

For the Stoics, the goal is thus a form of life in which we seek “only the goods that [we] are able to attain, and [to] try to avoid only those evils which it is possible to avoid.”⁶⁴ Hadot illustrates the distinction with an example from Epictetus:

If I am out on the high seas and perceive a peal of thunder and the whistling winds of a storm, I cannot deny that I perceive these terrifying sounds, for that is a comprehensive and objective presentation....If I merely note within myself that Fate has confronted me with a storm, then my inner discourse corresponds exactly to the objective presentation, and I am in the domain of truth. In fact, however, my perception of these sounds will no doubt cause in me a state of terror, which is a passion. Under the sway of emotion, I will say to myself: ‘Here I am in a state of misery. I may die, and death is an evil.’ If I give my assent to this inner discourse which is caused by terror, I will be in error as a Stoic, since my fundamental existential option is precisely that there is no other evil than moral evil. In general, it seems that error—but at the same time freedom—is situated within the value judgements which I bring to bear on events.⁶⁵

The storm is the product of nature, and as we cannot alter it, we cannot consider it evil: “The right moral attitude consists in recognizing as good or evil only that which is morally good or evil, and in considering as neither good nor bad, and therefore indifferent, that which is morally neither good nor bad.”⁶⁶

A sage does not merely understand such ideal principles, but rather lives them. It is not a matter of “belief,” but rather “a fundamental attitude, [which] consisted in a joyful ‘Yes!’ accorded at each instant to the movement of the world, directed by universal reason.”⁶⁷ As Hadot

⁶⁴ Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” 83.

⁶⁵ *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 132.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Hadot, “The Sage and the World,” 251.

describes it, Stoic philosophical exercises meant nothing less than “practicing how to ‘live;’ that is, how to live freely and consciously.”⁶⁸ “Consciously,” he continues, “in that we pass beyond the limits of individuality, to recognize ourselves as part of the reason-animated *cosmos*. Freely, in that we give up desiring that which does not depend on us and is beyond our control, so as to attach ourselves only to what depends on us: actions which are just and in conformity with reason.”⁶⁹ Thus the “thoughts and will of the Stoic wise man completely coincide with the thoughts, will, and development of Reason immanent to the evolution of the Cosmos.”⁷⁰ And even if unattainable, the *telos* of the Stoic life is “a complete reversal of our usual way of looking at things. We are to switch from our “human” vision of reality, in which our values depend on our passions, to a ‘natural’ vision of things, which replaces each event within the perspective of universal nature.”⁷¹ That is, the perspective of the fundamental distinction between natural and moral evil.

The Epicurean ideal was also centered around a concept of nature, but in this case the practitioner sought to live according to natural desire:

“Natural and necessary desires are those whose satisfaction delivers people from pain, and which correspond to the elementary needs or vital necessities. Natural but not necessary are, for example, desires for sumptuous foods and for sexual gratification. Neither natural nor necessary, but produced by empty opinions, are the limitless desires for wealth, glory, and immortality. An Epicurean saying aptly sums up this division of desires: ‘Thanks be to blessed Nature, who has made necessary things easy to obtain, and who has made things difficult to obtain unnecessary.’”⁷²

The Epicurean sage understands that “It is enough to satisfy the first category of desires, and give up the last—and eventually the second as well—in order to ensure the absence of worries,

⁶⁸ “Spiritual Exercises,” 86.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁷¹ Ibid., 83.

⁷² Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 117.

and to reveal the sheer joy of existing.”⁷³ Thus Epicurean philosophy “consists in knowing how to seek pleasure in a reasonable way,”⁷⁴ by seeking out only rational pleasures—those which are both natural and necessary.

The Epicurean arrives at this state of wisdom through an “*askesis* of desire,” which “consists in limiting one’s appetites—suppressing those desires which are neither natural nor necessary, and limiting as much as possible those which are natural but not necessary.”⁷⁵ In this way, the *askesis* of desire brings about rational pleasure, which is a “stable pleasure...pleasure in repose as a ‘state of equilibrium.’” It is “the state of the body when it is appeased and free of suffering; it consists in not being hungry, not being thirsty, and not being cold.”⁷⁶ As the satisfaction of all natural and necessary desires, and the absence of any unnecessary desires, this rational pleasure is perfect: “It cannot be increased, and no new pleasure can be added to it.”⁷⁷ From this vantage point, “the Epicurean sage...like the gods, watches the infinity of world arising out of atoms in the infinite void; nature is sufficient for his needs, and nothing ever disturbs the peace of his soul.”⁷⁸

Like their Epicurean and Stoic contemporaries, the Skeptics too “hoped to obtain freedom from trouble” though in this case “by using their judgment to resolve the contradiction between what appears to us and what is conceived of.”⁷⁹ However, the Skeptics depart from their contemporaries by recognizing that such judgment is in fact impossible for us in many cases. The solution is to learn to suspend judgement altogether. In contrast to the person who is driven to

⁷³ “Spiritual Exercises,” 87.

⁷⁴ *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 115.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Hadot, “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy,” 58.

⁷⁹ *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 143.

worry by the inability make an accurate judgement, “he who utters no opinion on what is naturally good or on what is naturally bad flees nothing, and does not exhaust himself in vain pursuits.”⁸⁰ The Skeptic overcomes the unhappiness and worry that accompanies our inability to judge by abstaining from judgement altogether: “Happily, freedom from trouble accompanied the suspension of their judgement, as shadows accompany bodies.”⁸¹

The figure of Pyrrho came to represent the ideal model of the Skeptical sage, a figure who suspended all judgement and therefore all philosophical discourse as well. Once these were eliminated, he was left only with “a way of life. Life itself, everyday life as everyone leads it.”⁸² The ideal Skeptic thus lives a life of judgement-free simplicity, which for that reason coincides with the everyday lives of everyday people. In this way, the Skeptic seeks “simply to utilize his natural resources—his sense and intelligence—just as laypeople do...to conform to the customs, laws, and institutions of our country, and follow our natural tendencies and dispositions—eat when we are hungry, drink when we are thirsty.”⁸³

However, even as the Skeptics sought to inhabit quotidian life, they did so on the other side of great philosophical effort. For that reason, the relationship of the philosopher to that life was at once identical and radically different than that of non-Skeptics:

Since the Skeptic was convinced that it is impossible to know whether one thing or event is better than another thing or event, he would enjoy firmly established peace of mind, thanks to his suspension of all value judgments on things. Such suspension would diminish his pain and suffering, should he ever have to face them, because it would prevent him from adding to his suffering or setbacks the agonizing thought that what he is experiencing is an evil. In everything he did, he was to limit himself to describing what he experienced, without adding anything about what things are or what they are worth. He was to be content to describe the sensory apparatus, without adding to it his opinion.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 145.

⁸³ Ibid., 144.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 145.

Here, the problem is not everyday life, nor customs and habits, but the ways in which we approach the events of our lives in judgement. The solution is not to abandon that life, but to re-approach it from a radically new perspective, free of the impetus to discern whether and how given events are good or bad, and thereby free of the worry at the root of our unhappiness.

II.i.c. Spiritual Exercises.

It is precisely here that spiritual exercises come in. For all of the schools, it was not simply a matter of understanding, but of training oneself toward the ideal. The Stoics are again representative here, in that leading a life that is both joyful and indifferent in the particularly Stoic senses of the term, is not just something that one wills into being. Indeed, however well we may conceptualize them, the fundamental distinctions of the varying schools are not so easily made within the course of daily life, certainly when attempting to control what seem like perfectly natural responses to the hardships that come our way. The changes in question must thus be cultivated, as a skill, a trade, or artform is cultivated, through long and careful effort until it is part of oneself—how or whatever that “self” is taken to be. And the particular forms that this training takes, in terms of the specific spiritual exercises taken up and the overall form of life that they constitute, must themselves be tailored to deliver one from a particular understanding of disquiet to a particular model of wisdom.

Attention. For the Stoics, that philosophical bridge is built on the foundations of the practice of *prosokhē*, or *attention* to the present moment. In both “Spiritual Exercises” and *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Hadot frames his discussion of Stoic philosophical practice through this concept of *prosokhē*. In the former text, he begins his descriptions of Stoic spiritual exercises with this concept; in the latter, he concludes his discussion of the Stoic school with it. In both

texts, attention to the present moment is described as both “the fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude”⁸⁵ and a spiritual exercise in its own right:

For [the Stoics], philosophy was a unique act which had to be practiced at each instant, with constantly renewed attention (*prosoche*) to oneself and the present moment. The Stoic’s fundamental attitude is this continuous attention, which means constant tension and consciousness, as well as vigilance exercised at every moment. Thanks to this attention, the philosopher is always perfectly aware not only of what he is doing, but also of what he is thinking (this is the task of lived logic) and of where he is—in other words, of his place in the cosmos. This is lived physics.⁸⁶

Attention consists in “a continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self-consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit.”⁸⁷ It is through this “spiritual vigilance” that the practitioner is able to keep the fundamental Stoic “rule of life,” “the distinction between what depends on us and what does not,”⁸⁸ clearly in view and ready at hand. Thus “attention to the present moment is...the key to spiritual exercises,” in that it “frees us from the passions,” insofar as it takes our focus off of “the past and the future—two areas which do *not* depend on us.”⁸⁹ This practice of “concentration on the miniscule present moment”⁹⁰ further increases our “vigilance of the spirit,”⁹¹ and allows us to keep the fundamental tenets of the school in view. It is not just an act of cognition, but one of “[steeping] ourselves in the rule of life (*kanon*), by mentally applying it to all of life’s possible different situations, just as we assimilate a grammatical or mathematical rule through practice, by applying it to individual cases.”⁹²

⁸⁵ Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” 84.

⁸⁶ *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 136.

⁸⁷ “Spiritual Exercises,” 84. See also *What is Ancient Philosophy?* where Hadot reiterates his description of the nature and importance of attention in nearly identical language: “The Stoic’s fundamental attitude is this continuous attention, which means constant tension and consciousness, as well as vigilance exercised at every moment.” (*What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 137-38.)

⁸⁸ “Spiritual Exercises,” 84.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 85.

On Hadot's account, the Stoic practice of attention to the present moment "allows us to accede to cosmic consciousness, by making us attentive to the infinite value of each instant, and causing us to accept each moment of existence from the viewpoint of the universal law of the *cosmos*."⁹³ This grand perspective is the most difficult to attain—if it is indeed attainable at all. Nevertheless, through the practice of *prosokhē*, this "lived physics," the Stoic worldview and way of life are bound together:

Such self-consciousness is, above all, moral consciousness, which seeks at every moment to purify and rectify our intentions. At every instant, it is careful to allow no other motive for action than the will to do good. Yet such self-consciousness is not merely rational; it is also a cosmic and rational consciousness. Attentive people live in the constant presence of universal Reason which is immanent within the cosmos. They see all things from the perspective of Reason, and consent joyfully to its will.⁹⁴

This "cosmic" vantage represents an ideal model of the perspective ultimately entailed by the principles of the school. As the Stoic distinction between what is and what is not within our control is based on an understanding of nature, for one who has acceded to the perspective of the cosmos itself, this distinction will be ever in view. It is in this way that we can see the fundamental connection between the practice and principle of attention, and that of Stoic physics, which we will return to below. However, it is not only through practices of attention that such a state is achieved. Nor can *prosokhē* be so neatly distinguished from the accompanying threads of Stoicism. And there is perhaps no other spiritual exercise that overlaps with attention in such close and complex ways as that of meditation.

Meditation. The concept of meditation is perhaps the most ubiquitous among practices of the self, and takes on a wide array of forms in differing traditions, times, and places. Indeed, Hadot demonstrates that within a given school or tradition, "meditation" can refer to an entire

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 138.

class of practices, rather than a singular exercise. Within the Stoic school alone it takes the form of anticipation, self-examination, and memory. Hadot argues, however, that in all its Stoic forms, the goal is always preparation in the present moment for what may come: “The exercise of meditation allows us to be ready at the moment when the unexpected—perhaps dramatic—circumstance occurs,”⁹⁵ and to respond according to the Stoic ideal. Thus, “the exercise of meditation is an attempt to control inner discourse, in an effort to render it coherent. The goal is to arrange it around a simple, universal principle: the distinction between what does and what does not depend on us, or between freedom and nature.”⁹⁶ Whether in the future-directed form of anticipation, past-directed practices of memory, or focused attention to the present moment, meditation, like all Stoic spiritual exercises, serves to bring about the “inner coherence” that attends a life lived according to the distinction between natural and moral evil.

Anticipation. For example, in the famous Stoic *praemeditatio malorum*, or the premeditation of evils, “we are to represent to ourselves poverty, suffering, and death.”⁹⁷ Although the *praemeditatio* did not exclusively focus on death, the latter was indeed one of its primary objects and a central focus. Focusing our attention on *potential* future events and otherwise unexpected hardships, including our own eventual end, “those who practice *praemeditatio* ‘do not flinch beneath the blows of Fate because they have calculated its attacks in advance; for of those things which happen against our will, even the most painful are lessened by foresight, when our thought no longer encounters anything unexpected in events but dulls the perception of them, as if they were old, worn-out things.’”⁹⁸ In other words, the *praemeditatio*

⁹⁵ “Spiritual Exercises,” 85.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 137.

prepared practitioners to respond to the inevitable difficulties of life according to the fundamental Stoic principle of indifference to all that which does not depend on us.

Time. It is in the context of meditation that Hadot notes something important, not only for the Stoics, but for their contemporaries as well, regarding the relationship to *time* that spiritual exercises were meant to cultivate. For Stoic and Epicurean alike, the ideal, whatever it is, can *only* be found within the present moment. As Hadot elaborates:

Like the Stoic, the Epicurean finds perfection in the present moment. For him, the pleasure of the present moment does not need to last in order to be perfect. A single instant of pleasure is as perfect as an eternity thereof...Pleasure is not a movement which unfolds within time, nor does it depend on duration. It is a reality in itself which is not situated within the category of time. We can say of Epicurean pleasure, as of Stoic virtue, that their quantity does not change their essence...This is why to hope for an increase in pleasure from the future is to be ignorant of pleasure's very nature; for we can achieve stable, appeasing pleasure only if we know how to limit ourselves to what we can obtain within the present moment, without letting ourselves be swept along by the unreasonable limitlessness of our desires. Stoic virtue and Epicurean pleasure are thus perfect at every moment.⁹⁹

As Hadot, following these ancient schools, will argue often, present alone is indeed our happiness. It is for this reason among others that Hadot was, after all, so moved by Friedmann's injunction to "step out of duration."¹⁰⁰

But as important as this emphasis on the timeless present is, we must be as precise as possible with regard to its practical and doctrinal specificity for the ancient schools. This is because that emphasis did not necessarily exclude certain relationships with both past and future, in and through spiritual exercises which directed one to the present moment *by way* of meditation on past and future. Even the meditation on past experiences could re-direct one to the present, and prepare one for the future. In the same way, so could a certain attention to the future. And among the forms of future-directed meditation, perhaps none is as well-known and widespread as the meditation on death. In fact, beyond Epicurean, Stoic, Hellenistic, or any other particular

⁹⁹ Ibid., 197.

¹⁰⁰ Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 359-60.

school, Hadot argues that “the exercise of death is one of the most fundamental philosophical exercises,”¹⁰¹ and is certainly one of the most universal *in general*.

Meditation on Death. The Epicurean meditation on death was both closely related to and fundamentally different from its Stoic counterpart. For both schools, the anticipatory meditation on the future, and on death in particular, was in fact a form of attention to the present. As Epicurus said, “The exercise of living well and the exercise of dying well are one and the same thing,”¹⁰² or as Hadot puts it, we would be wrong “to oppose meditation on death and meditation on life. They are fundamentally identical, and both are an indispensable condition for becoming self-aware.”¹⁰³ This sentiment is not just shared between Stoics and Epicureans, as numerous versions of it appear across historical, cultural, and philosophical distances. As Hadot points out,

From this point of view, we would be wrong to establish a radical opposition between the exercise of death in Plato, on the one hand, and in the Stoics and Epicureans, on the other. In both cases, the goal of this exercise is to become self-aware by means of the thought of death, for the self which thinks of its death always, in one way or another, thinks of the a-temporality of the Spirit or being.¹⁰⁴

The proper attention to death is thus a consistent doctrinal prerequisite for the correct relationship to the present.

For the Epicureans, “meditation on death is intended to make us aware of both the absolute value of existence and the nothingness of death, to give us the love of life and suppress the fear of death.”¹⁰⁵ It allows us to understand that “death, qua non-being, is nothing for us,” and that for that very reason, “it also means rejoicing at each instant that we have acceded to being, and knowing that death cannot diminish the plenitude of the pleasure of being.”¹⁰⁶ This

¹⁰¹ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 198.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

practice starts, as we have seen, with a diagnosis of our unhappiness centered around the threefold distinction of our desires, and the practice works ultimately as an askesis of desire, meant to bring true pleasure by limiting us to those desires which are both natural and necessary. The Stoic *praemeditatio*, by contrast, is an askesis of judgement, meant to bring us to a state of indifference to the world outside our control.

Thus while both Stoic and Epicurean engaged in the anticipatory meditation on death in order to re-shape the relationship to the present in an ideal way, they did so for significantly different reasons, in order to create a different sort of person. In both cases, although we must abandon a certain unhealthy relationship to the future, we can only arrive at the proper relationship to the present with the aid of future-directed spiritual exercises, chief among them the meditation on death.

Memory. But meditation was not only a future-directed practice of anticipation. It also took the form of past-directed practices of memory. As a “dogmatic” tradition, the Stoics “tried to present their doctrine in accordance with a rigorously systematic logical sequence, for which the ancients admired them.”¹⁰⁷ They did so in order to “gather the fundamental dogmas together in condensed forms, and link them together by rigorous argumentation, in order to form a systematic, highly concentrated nucleus, sometimes reduced to one brief saying, which would thus have greater persuasive force and mnemonic efficacy.”¹⁰⁸ The systemization of the tenets of the school in this way aided in the Stoic requirement to “keep the school’s essential dogmas present in their minds, by dint of a constant effort of memory.”¹⁰⁹ Memorization was “meant to have a psychagogic value: they were intended to produce an effect on the soul of the auditor or

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 106.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 106-07.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 106.

reader.”¹¹⁰ By thus “engrave striking maxims in our memory...when the time comes, they can help us accept such events, which are, after all, part of the course of nature.”¹¹¹ With these maxims and rules “at hand,” we can “check moments of fear, anger, or sadness.”¹¹²

Similarly, “Epicurean instruction began with the reading and memorization of short summaries of Epicurean doctrine, presented in the form of very brief sayings.”¹¹³ The same seemed to be true for the Skeptics, who also engaged in practices of memory with regard to the fundamental maxims of the school, using “short, striking sayings to renew their choice of life at each moment. Some examples are: ‘This is no better than that,’ ‘Perhaps,’ ‘All is indeterminate,’ ‘Everything escapes comprehension,’ ‘Every argument is opposed by an equal argument,’ ‘I suspend my judgment.’”¹¹⁴ The commonality goes even further, as for all of these schools, the practice of memorization

...was not an instance of conceptual construction as an end in itself which happened to have ethical consequences for the Stoic or Epicurean way of life. On the contrary, the goal of these systems was to gather the fundamental dogmas together in condensed form, and link them together by rigorous argumentation, in order to form a systematic, highly concentrated nucleus, sometimes reduced force and mnemonic efficacy. Above all, such sayings had a psychagogic value: they were intended to produce an effect on the soul of the auditor or reader.”¹¹⁵

At the same time, the practice of memory was in no way limited to the recollection of maxims.

As Hadot notes, “Concerning the past, the Epicureans admitted that it can provide us stable pleasure, but only insofar as we ‘re-actualize’ it.”¹¹⁶ It is under this specific understanding, Hadot elaborates, that Epicurus could write “that his physical sufferings are assuaged by the memory of the philosophical conversations he had with his disciples. And this may mean not only that the

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 107.

¹¹¹ Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” 85.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 106.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 145.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 106-07.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 195.

memory of past pleasures provides him with pleasure in the present, but that the philosophical reasoning he recalls likewise helps him to overcome his suffering.”¹¹⁷ The recollection of past pleasures—insofar as they were true pleasures at the time, and remain so—can be “re-actualized” through practices of memory in the present.

Self-examination. Meditation did not only consist in practices of anticipation and memory, but of forms of self-examination as well, which requires both. In the Stoic case, meditative self-examination consisted in the daily anticipation and nightly reflection on oneself, according to the principles and maxims of the school: “First thing in the morning, we should go over in advance what we have to do during the course of the day, and decide on the principles which will guide and inspire our actions. In the evening, we should examine ourselves again, so as to be aware of the faults we have committed or the progress we have made. We should also examine our dreams.”¹¹⁸ Such a practice, whether internal or through the medium of writing the self, serves as both preparation and correction. Preparation for those cases in which one’s Stoic indifference would surely be tested, and reflective self-correction for those moments in the day when it surely had been, and was found wanting.

Physics. As important as meditative practices of self-examination were, one did not only merely look inward, or observe other people. As we have seen, Stoic and Epicurean principles were derived from an understanding of the cosmos, garnered from the practice of physics, which informed the fundamental distinction between that which is and is not within our control, or the domains of moral or natural evil. Here we may see physics in a more “discursive” role, which serves to justify the principles of the school:

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” 85.

“For the Stoics, as for the Epicureans, physics was not developed for its own sake but had an ethical finality: ‘One teaches physics only so that one can teach the distinction which must be established with regard to goods and evils.’ In the first instance, we can say that Stoic physics was indispensable for ethics, because it showed people that there are some things which are not in their power but depend on causes external to them—causes which are linked in a necessary, rational manner.”¹¹⁹

Here physics plays the supporting role of an intellectual discourse, meant to furnish reasons and justifications first for a worldview, and in turn for the ethical prescriptions which are argued to follow from it.

But we also have something radically different from contemporary physics here, as ancient physics does not simply consist in a set of true or false claims about the cosmos. Rather, “It also has an ethical finality, insofar as the rationality of human action is based on the rationality of nature. From the point of view of physics, the will for self-coherence, which is the basis of the Stoic choice, appears as a fundamental law within material reality, internal to each being and to the totality of beings.”¹²⁰ Thus, “Philosophical discourse about physics aimed to justify the choice of life we have just mentioned, and to make explicit the way of being-in-the-world that it implies.”¹²¹

However, this work of intellectual support and justification in no way exhausts the role of physics within ancient Stoicism. This is because, in its differing forms, the pursuit of physics is itself a spiritual exercise. Through the pursuit of physics, the Stoics practiced a form what Hadot calls “imaginative ‘overflight,’ which causes human affairs to be regarded as of little importance,”¹²² which he discerns in both Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. The Stoic form was similar, though not identical, to those of the Epicureans and other schools, in that it required seeing the world from the greatest possible perspective, that of the universe and of reason itself:

¹¹⁹ *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 128.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” 98.

“Putting theory into practice begins with an exercise that consists in recognizing oneself as part of the Whole, elevating oneself to cosmic consciousness, or immersing oneself within the totality of the cosmos. While meditating on Stoic physics, we are to try to see all things within the perspective of universal Reason. To achieve this, we must practice the imaginative exercise which consists in seeing all human things from above.”¹²³

Or, as he says with specific regard to the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius:

The philosopher must abandon his partial, egoistic vision of reality, in order, by way of physics, to rise to the point of seeing things as universal Reason sees them. Above all, the philosopher must intensely wish the common good of the universe and of society, by discovering that a part can possess no other proper good than the common good of the All.¹²⁴

This is physics as a spiritual exercise, insofar as the contemplation of nature was an ongoing practice which brought about a fundamental shift within the practitioner, on the level of the self, one’s relation to the world, and the larger human community.

The practice of physics also held a special place within the Epicurean school. As Hadot notes, “The study of physics is a particularly important spiritual exercise: ‘we should not think that any other end is served by knowledge of celestial phenomena...than freedom from disturbance and firm confidence, just as in other fields of study.’”¹²⁵ Hadot continues, noting that “Contemplation of the physical world and imagination of the infinite are important elements of Epicurean physics. Both can bring about a complete change in our way of looking at things. The closed universe is infinitely dilated, and we derive from this spectacle a unique spiritual pleasure.”¹²⁶ Just as in the meditation on death, the practice of physics re-directed one to the pure pleasure of existing in the present moment.

But the exercise of physics, with its ability to re-focus our attention through a newer, grander, perspective, was also like the meditation on death in its near-universal ubiquity, at least

¹²³ *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 136.

¹²⁴ *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 99. See also Chapter 7 in the same text for Hadot’s discussion of the “discipline of desire” in the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius. Hadot argues that for Marcus, the askesis of desire is tied directly to the practice of physics.

¹²⁵ “Spiritual Exercises,” 87.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 87-88.

among the ancient schools that Hadot describes. Indeed, on Hadot's reading "physics becomes a spiritual exercise"¹²⁷ in some form or another in traditions ranging from the Platonic dialogues, to the Aristotelians, to Plutarch and Seneca:¹²⁸

In the first place, physics can be a contemplative activity, which has its end in itself, providing joy and serenity to the soul, and liberating it from day-to-day worries. This is the spirit of Aristotelian physics: 'nature, which fashioned creatures, gives amazing pleasure in their study to all who can trace links of causation, and are naturally philosophers.' As we have seen, it was in the contemplation of nature that the Epicurean Lucretius found 'a divine delight.' For the Stoic Epictetus, the meaning of our existence resides in contemplation: we have been placed on earth in order to contemplate divine creation, and we must not die before we have witnessed its marvels and lived in harmony with nature.¹²⁹

For a Stoic like Epictetus "In the last analysis, 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."¹³⁰ The Stoics are again representative here however, as the practice of physics was also a cultivation of perspective for many of the ancient schools, which Hadot describes in a range of terms: "the contemplation of the Whole,"¹³¹ "imaginative 'overflight,'" ¹³² the "spiritual exercise of the vision of totality,"¹³³ and so on. It is perhaps here that we see some of the most consistent overlap between ancient views.

At the same time, despite these formal and even at times doctrinal similarities between the schools, what is shared is also accompanied by what is not. With regard to physics, Hadot is clear that even in sharing the experience of a view from above, we do not necessarily view the same thing, nor do we necessarily interpret similar experiences in comparable ways: "Clearly, the precise meaning of the contemplation of nature varies widely from one philosophy to

¹²⁷ Ibid., 97.

¹²⁸ See *ibid.*, 96-98.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 97.

¹³⁰ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 136.

¹³¹ "Spiritual Exercises," 97.

¹³² Ibid., 98.

¹³³ Ibid., 99.

another. There is a great deal of difference between Aristotelian physics, for example, and the feeling for nature as we find it in Philo of Alexandria and Plutarch.”¹³⁴ The reasons for which one sought “the view from above,” what exactly it was taken to be a view “of,” and the nature of the viewer, all varied in ways that ranged from the exceedingly subtle to the profound. Even in the ecstatic moment of “losing oneself,” we begin with a conception of the “self” to be lost, reasons for losing it, and nature of the sage that emerges on the other side.

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It is thus through detailed study of the example of physics as a spiritual exercise, along with practices of meditation, anticipation, and many others that I cannot rehearse here, that Hadot demonstrates the way in which, for the ancient schools, “the logical and physical parts of philosophy were not purely theoretical. Rather, they too corresponded to a lived philosophy.”¹³⁵ Indeed, through all of these practices and many more, Hadot argues that “in a philosophy that is put into practice, the limits between the parts of philosophy became indistinct,”¹³⁶ as philosophy itself expands from a purely cognitive activity into a complete form of life.

III. The Philosophy of Common Life

For Hadot, as we have seen, “The essential part of philosophy is not discourse, but life and action:”¹³⁷ this is equally the lesson of the practice of physics and the exchange of letters between teacher and student. And it is for this reason that throughout his work Hadot takes pains

¹³⁴ Ibid., 97.

¹³⁵ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 137-38.

¹³⁶ Ibid. See also *ibid.*, 172-73.

¹³⁷ Hadot et al., *The present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, 188.

to distance his work from any explicit elitism. Indeed, as Davidson argues in his Introduction to *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, it is precisely a concern for the possibility of philosophy as an *everyday*, ordinary way of life that caused the shift in Hadot's primary philosophical sympathies toward Epicureanism and Stoicism.¹³⁸ It is also clear that this popular impulse equally motivates his praise for ancient philosophy as something that "proposed to mankind an art of living," and his criticism of contemporary academic philosophy as something that "by contrast...appears above all as the construction of a technical jargon [language] reserved for specialists."¹³⁹ Indeed, Hadot's concern that "philosophy as a way of life" could, and indeed should, be an *everyday* way of life threads its way throughout his works.

But while it is true that some of the ancient schools were open to non-elite participation, we do not have much of a record of what "lay-philosophy" or "popular philosophy" would've looked like. For that reason, it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to use such examples as a model for the project of "translation" into a contemporary context:

This was why dogmatic philosophies like Stoicism and Epicureanism had a popular missionary character: since technical and theoretical discussions were matters for specialists, they could be summed up—for the benefit of beginners and students who were making progress—in a number of formulas which were tightly linked together and which were essentially rules for practical life. In this respect, such philosophies coincided with the 'missionary' and 'popular' spirit of Socrates. Whereas Platonism and Aristotelianism were reserved for an elite which had the 'leisure' to study, carry out research, and contemplate, Epicureanism and Stoicism were addressed to everyone: rich and poor, male and female, free citizens and slaves. Whoever adopted the Epicurean or Stoic way of life and put it into practice would be considered a philosopher, even if he or she did not develop a philosophical discourse, either written or oral.¹⁴⁰

At the same time, Hadot is under no illusions that to practice philosophy as an everyday way of life, at any time and place, is neither easy nor at times possible—even as it is philosophy itself that can provide the tools we need to cope with and survive precisely those difficulties. Hadot

¹³⁸ See *ibid.*, xi.

¹³⁹ Hadot, "Spiritual Exercises," 272.

¹⁴⁰ *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 108.

explores this tension a short and important piece called “Is Philosophy a Luxury?” In it, he demonstrates that the answer to the titular question will depend on just what we mean by both “luxury” and “philosophy.” For that reason, it is a question that he can only answer with a pointedly equivocal “yes and no.”

Hadot’s “no” is a consequence of his very idea of philosophy, and he says as much straightaway: “It will then become evident that the question raised obliges us to ask ourselves, necessarily, about the very definition of philosophy. And finally, even beyond the nature of philosophy, our reflection will lead us to the drama of the human condition.”¹⁴¹ We know for certain that when Hadot speaks of philosophy, he does not mean the academic career of the contemporary philosophy professor—though it is quite clear his vision does not *necessarily* exclude that particular form of philosophical life as economic vocation.¹⁴² That form, no matter how we approach or understand it, is very much an academic and economic luxury, among the many other forms of political and cultural resources which make it possible.

Conversely, and as we have seen in his approach to the ancients, Hadot would much rather “glimpse a type of philosophy that is, in a way, identical with a person’s life, the life of a person aware of himself, ceaselessly rectifying his thought and his action, aware of his belonging to humanity and to the world.”¹⁴³ This understanding is at the heart of his claim that

Philosophy cannot be a luxury, since it is linked to life itself. Instead, it would be an elementary need for human beings. This is why such philosophies as Epicureanism and Stoicism sought to be universal.

¹⁴¹ Hadot et al., *The present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, 186.

¹⁴² This is of course very much a question for another venue. I am indebted to the late Professor Steve Collins for the most illuminating conversation I have ever had on this question, in the University of Chicago Divinity School coffee shop, in the Fall of 2016. Professor Collins’ generosity, grace, and insight are well-missed and cherished, as are our too-brief and too-infrequent discussions of Ornette Coleman.

¹⁴³ Hadot et al., *The present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, 189.

Proposing to people the art of living as a human being, they addressed all human beings: slaves, women, and foreigners. They were missionary and sought to convert the masses.¹⁴⁴

Here, Hadot endorses those ancient schools that not only held that philosophy was a way of life, but acted according to the belief that it could be a way of life for anyone. Spiritual exercises, on this account, were not only the purview of those specialists who opted to—and had the opportunity to— “leave the world” to practice them.

And yet, just as Hadot rejects any kind of philosophy that would be a “luxury” of this sort, he is under no illusions regarding the economic, moral, political and other factors that, in the end, do constitute philosophy as a luxury. This includes even those forms which fall under his own definition of philosophy as “part of life” and open to all. This is the heart of the semi-tragic “yes” that he offers himself:

Yet it was in vain. For we must not fool ourselves: this philosophy, conceived as a way of living, cannot, as always, be anything but a luxury. The drama of the human condition is that it is impossible not to philosophize, and at the same time it is impossible to philosophize. Philosophical consciousness opens up for people the profusion of the wonders of the cosmos and the earth, a more acute perception, an inexhaustible wealth of exchanges with other human beings, with other souls, an invitation to act with benevolence and justice. But worries, necessities, and the banalities of everyday life prevent us from acceding to this conscious life of all its possibilities. How can one harmoniously unite daily life with philosophical consciousness? It can only be a fragile conquest, always threatened....And how could the billions of human beings crushed by poverty and suffering achieve this consciousness? Might not being a philosopher also mean to suffer from this isolation, this privilege, always bearing in mind this drama of the human condition?¹⁴⁵

Hadot has said so much here, and it is characteristic of him to end the essay with a question. And on my reading, it is a political question just as much as it is a philosophical one.

While philosophy cannot be understood as the exclusive domain of elites, I take it that Hadot would agree that those conditions that are the condition of the very existence of such economic and social distinctions necessarily impede the practice of philosophy, even under his own definition. The banalities of everyday life, the large and small burdens of economic reality,

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 189-90.

access to education or other material needs: even under a description that assimilates philosophy to “part of life,” the practical factors which make life itself difficult will also make philosophy difficult.

At the very same time, insofar as just these economic or cultural burdens also give rise to spiritual demands, which can range anywhere from psychological needs to questions of everyday ethics and happiness, they are at the heart of Hadot’s concern to “offer contemporary mankind a way of life.” I take him to hold that these ever-present difficulties are precisely why the understanding of philosophy that he offers is in fact so vital. In sum: Hadot believes that philosophy, as a form of life characterized by spiritual exercises, can indeed be taken up by anyone, and in direct response to the spiritual demands that can and do emerge from the material difficulties that so often characterize everyday life. At the same time, he is under no illusion that those very difficulties can and justifiably do prevent the practice of spiritual exercises, and thus constitute philosophy, under any definition, as a luxury. This answer is not a contradiction, but rather a problem, a question, and a knot that he leaves for others to untie.

And yet, despite Hadot’s tireless efforts, especially in the face of the daunting problems presented by the preservation and persistence of ancient texts, the examples that he gives and analyzes come from traditions and individuals that fall squarely into the category of specialists. This is the case for all of the standard historical reasons, and even a sympathetic reading can do little to change the resources that are available to us. Most if not *all* of the examples of spiritual exercise that Hadot analyses are those practiced by ancient religious or philosophical professionals. We do not even encounter lay-practitioners from among the economic or social elite, let alone laborers, lower-caste individuals in general, or women of any status (with the rare exceptions of figures like the Cynic Hipparchia)—certainly not in their own words. Even

enslaved philosophers like Epictetus and Diogenes (who is said to have been sold into slavery at a certain point) were an exception, enjoying certain forms of status and education.

The result of these problems is that we must rely on the “extraordinary”—those individuals who wrote texts, were members of schools or monasteries, etc.—whose reports and personal reflections will most likely fail to accurately reflect the experiences and motivations of the seemingly “ordinary” person. And if nothing else, figures like Diogenes and Epictetus were by no means “ordinary.” And if so, even if the Stoics and Epicureans “sought to convert the masses,”¹⁴⁶ we cannot be sure that the masses who did take up their doctrines, dogmas, and practices did so in the ways that are reported to us by the textual authorities that we now possess. And if common practitioners are indeed creative, productive participants in their own spiritual lives, it is extremely difficult to understand just how.

I raise this point here because it has direct consequences for understanding certain patterns in Hadot’s analyses of the ancient schools. If spiritual exercises are shaped by spiritual demands, and if spiritual demands are shaped by the particularity of given historical conditions, then the forms of life which may emerge from this constellation may evince a specificity and efficaciousness that can only be understood within the particularity of the context from which they emerge. Thus, until we place given spiritual exercises in their proper context and begin to understand the specificity of motivations of the people who took them up, then there is little to no practical difference in our approach to the question. Even when drawing on the resources provided by elite specialists, the logic of spiritual exercises that I have attempted to make explicit here does suggest, within enough reason to act upon, that there may well be something about the experience of the “average” practitioner that makes it wholly other than that of the specialist. It

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 189.

seems likely that the particular forms of creative volition endemic to the difficulties of the day to day can and do produce beliefs and practices that would not be possible for those in more authoritative or professional positions.

It is in this way that the question of philosophy as an everyday way of life and the political content and consequences of spiritual exercises come together with the axis of spiritual demands, spiritual exercises, and the figure of the sage. The space of the more humble, immediate, and local spiritual demands and spiritual *telos* often tends to fall outside of those domains toward which Hadot, and even Foucault have, for one reason or another, tended to direct their inquiries. Thus, if we [a] look again and get a more clear historical and sociological handle on what the demands are that we are concerned to address, if we [b] understand that practices come into being to treat those demands and [c] our critical attention is not directed solely at specialists, [d] we may find forms of “ordinary” and localized practice the very particularity of which would have rendered them invisible without this set of methodological clarifications. In the end, though lacking in Hadot explicitly, none of this is actually in direct contradiction with his project, nor does his work exclude such an approach. Even so, the problem of specialists remains the first important barrier to the identification of properly “contemporary” practices of self-overcoming. The second, as we will see, is also implicated within it, and presents even greater methodological hurdles.

IV. Spiritual Exercises in the Present.

All of the examples rehearsed here, and throughout Hadot’s oeuvre, begin with the diagnosis and description of a problem, a set of spiritual demands. Tied to each of these descriptions is a principle (or set of principles) which, when “achieved” would mark that state of

being which would at least mitigate (if not annul) the deleterious effects of the former. In this way, the conception of the sage offered by each school is directly conditioned by the spiritual demands taken to be primary by that school, and vice-versa. The beginning and end are linked by the substance of the philosophical life itself, which consists in the practice of spiritual exercises.

Thus despite the many differences and distinctions among them, on Hadot's reading the ancient schools share the formal coherence of a series of tightly knit, mutually co-constituting relationships between philosophical diagnosis, telos, and concrete forms of practice. Like a medical diagnosis, the philosophical diagnosis directly informs the healing regimen, as they reciprocally inform and are informed by the model of spiritual health itself. In some cases, identical spiritual exercises (or at least, practices belonging to the same larger class of exercises) could be taken up for different reasons and to different ends. In other cases, a given philosophical outlook would preclude the use of commensurate practices by differing schools (i.e., it would be very hard to imagine a Skeptic taking up a Cynical form of life). In all cases, for Hadot, such practices were the very body of ancient philosophy itself.

It is here that the prescriptive and descriptive threads within Hadot's oeuvre come together. Though where Carlier saw a "discrepancy"¹⁴⁷ between the two, I take it that the logic of spiritual exercises excavated here from Hadot's studies has direct, intersecting consequences for the task of integrating ancient practice into contemporary life. From Hadot's initial invocation of Friedmann, through the analyses of ancient spiritual exercises that follow, we can draw the following conclusions: First, that there is indeed something called "spiritual demand," which motivates one's engagement in spiritual exercises. Second, that there are distinctly *contemporary* spiritual demands, and that as both Hadot and Friedmann refer to them, they are the product of

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., xv.

some combination of the economic, political, cultural, religious, and other conditions that shape the lives of subjects in general.¹⁴⁸ Third, if that is the case, then it must also be the case that given constellations of spiritual demand are always shaped by the particular historical circumstances out of which they are generated, necessarily unique to different times and places. Finally, and as we have also established above, if forms of practice are really to address that demand, both the *telos* and the shape of the practices themselves must also be responsive to the conditions which motivate them in the first place. In other words: properly contemporary spiritual demands should require properly contemporary spiritual exercises.

And for that reason, any discussion of properly contemporary spiritual exercises in the present has the practical requirement of a methodical analysis of contemporary spiritual demands, on model of Hadot's detailed study of the ancients. And it is for that reason in turn that any analysis contemporary of practices of self-change or self-care, observable in households and communities every day, cannot simply dismiss such practices as cheap or imperfect imitations of more authentic forms of religious life. Rather, we must ask the deceptively simple and pragmatic question of why one has taken up a given practice, what the results of its engagement have been, why it persists or not, and so on.

For her part, Carlier is rather sanguine about the possibility of the historical transposition of ancient spiritual exercises on Hadot's account. In a brief itinerary in her Introduction to *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, she presents a series of ancient examples as self-evidently relevant and applicable to the present:

Was it known that the Scaevolae, adepts of Stoicism, proved themselves to be honest magistrates? Or that Mucius Scaevola, as governor of a province, did not fill his pockets, as was customary, but paid for his trips with his own money, and demanded the same integrity from his subordinates? Or that when the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius, who was accountable for millions of subjects, learned of the deaths of child

¹⁴⁸ If this second premise seems somewhat underspecified here, it will be thoroughly elaborated in Chapter 2.

trapeze artists, he went to the trouble of commanding that these exercises should henceforth be protected by nets? Or that, defending the Roman borders against the Sarmatians somewhere in the Balkans, he asked himself about the legitimacy of that war?¹⁴⁹

Carlier concludes, forcefully, with the assertion that “These principles and examples would be useful in today’s democracies, without there being any need to ‘update’ them.”¹⁵⁰

I am admittedly not as optimistic as Carlier here, and on my reading at least, neither is Hadot. Indeed, it is unclear what actual principles are being referred to, other than what seem like some exceedingly general truisms. Do we really need ancient Stoicism to understand that civil servants should not take bribes or embezzle money? What exactly does that tradition specifically offer us that we would not find elsewhere? And if it does offer something specific with regard to the honesty required of public figures, we would still need to understand the details of the life, work, and expectations of such figures at the time of the Scaevolus in order to see anything more than a general lesson. Similarly, it is easy to agree that rulers who are conducting war should interrogate the legitimacy of such action. But shouldn’t the specifics of the kind of imperial (rather than, say, consular, monarchical, presidential, parliamentary, etc.) power that Marcus Aurelius was able to wield inform our understanding his reflections on a given campaign? Should we not also contextualize those reflections within what we know of the norms of war, diplomacy and empire at the time, the experiences and lives of average soldiers then and now—and then re-contextualize them against the lessons of war in the 20th and 21st centuries, which have been so hard-won?

It never becomes clear from her brief comments what Carlier means when she speaks of “updating” a given tradition, whether we agree that such an update is necessary or not. But if the

¹⁴⁹ Hadot et al., *The present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, xix.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

working definition of the kind of historical translation that I have attempted to excavate from the very logic of spiritual exercises presented here is at all accurate, then I take it that there is no case in which any such practice can be simply transposed from one context to another. In fact, this is not even a prescriptive claim, but a descriptive one: any such attempt at transposition will necessarily entail translation, even in cases where we claim otherwise.

Hadot himself is much more aware of these difficulties: “There can be no question, of course, of mechanically imitating stereotyped schemas. After all, did not Socrates and Plato urge their disciples to find the solutions they needed by themselves?”¹⁵¹ Still, Hadot strikes a critical balance, noting of course that “we cannot afford to ignore such a valuable quantity of experience, accumulated over millennia” in the “highly rich and varied Western tradition.”¹⁵² As so, while Hadot is not interested in the mechanical “imitation” of ancient spiritual exercises, his own methodology should necessarily commit him to the view that a detailed historical-sociological analyses of given conditions are required to bring ancient spiritual exercises into contemporary discourse.

In fact, Hadot’s approach to the ancient texts, as developed, deployed, and described so meticulously throughout his oeuvre, evinces precisely the model of detailed and methodical investigation necessary for the successful “translation” of ancient practices into a contemporary context. In order to “to understand the works of the philosophers of antiquity,” he explains,

we must take account of all of the concrete conditions in which they wrote, all the constraints that weighed upon them: the framework of the school, the very nature of *philosophia*, literary genres, rhetorical rules, dogmatic imperatives, and traditional modes of reasoning. One cannot read an ancient author the way one does a contemporary author (which does not mean that contemporary authors are easier to understand than those of antiquity). In fact, the works of antiquity are produced under entirely different conditions.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” 108.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Hadot, “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy,” 61.

In *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, he describes these principles in more precise detail, in response to a question posed by Arnold Davidson regarding the interpretation of ancient texts:

I feel like the first requirement of a scholar, not only for a scholar but also for anyone who reads an ancient text, is to aim for objectivity and, if possible, for truth. This is to say that there is no point in distorting the meaning of a text to adapt it to the demands of modern life, or to the aspirations of the soul, and so on. The first duty is above all the goal of objectivity.

In addition, one must, whenever possible, always attempt to resituate the text under study within its historical perspective. It is extremely important not to commit anachronisms, in the rush to give the text a contemporary meaning. On this score, I would like to evoke briefly one of my constant concerns in the interpretation of texts, precisely to avoid anachronism. This is the effort to resituate, as much as possible, the works within the concrete conditions in which they were written. On the one hand, there are spiritual conditions, that is, philosophical, rhetorical, or poetic traditions. On the other hand, there are material conditions, school and social environment, constraints arising from the material support of writing, and historical circumstances. Every work should be resituated in the praxis from which it emanates.¹⁵⁴

Further on he concludes, decisively: “In fact, the meaning intended by the ancient author is never contemporary. It is ancient, and that is all there is to it.”¹⁵⁵

Within the domain of his descriptive project, Hadot thus is adamant that in order to understand ancient texts, we must avoid anachronism, and rigorously strive to understand the conditions—spiritual or material—under which a text was composed, the needs and demands it set out to meet. With regard to the prescriptive thread within his work, these principles speak precisely to the problems of bringing those ancient practices into contemporary usage. In other words, if Hadot’s project is a fundamentally historicist one, then that methodology and the principles which undergird it must go both ways.

VI.i. The Work of Translation

And yet within Hadot’s own writing, we do not see anything approaching the depth and extent of his research into the ancient context in terms of what would, on that very model, be

¹⁵⁴ Hadot et al., *The present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, 67-68.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

required to “update” or “translate” ancient spiritual exercises for our own time and place. But, and it must be clear, this is not so much a problem for Hadot, or with his work. Rather, it is a problem suggested and framed by that work. At very least, this lacunae in his own research is understandable. On the one hand, his primary goal consistently remains the study and accurate re-contextualization of ancient spiritual exercises. That project, the delineation and perfection of the methods required, was extensive enough to constitute an entire life’s work. Understood in this way, the prescriptive project, while in many ways central to his own motivations, would always be secondary and dependent upon the descriptive. The former could never really get off the ground, certainly not without the rigor that Hadot would demand, without the exhaustive and perhaps endless work of the latter.

On the other hand, if Carlier is correct in her Introduction that the prescriptive thread in Hadot’s work was meant to have an implicit force, to “discreetly ‘turn’ the reader toward philosophy understood in this sense,”¹⁵⁶ then it would also make sense that he so seldom engages in explicitly prescriptive philosophical discourse. This tacit approach would also be commensurate with the spirit of Hadot’s query, on just this topic: “After all did not Socrates and Plato urge their disciples to find the solutions they needed by themselves?”¹⁵⁷ And so, as he says, this work is in fact ours to do, using the resources that Hadot provides, whether they be his readings of ancient texts or the methodological principles that produced them.

At the same time, Hadot does, in a handful of instances, indulge in commenting on the possibility of practicing spiritual exercises in the present, in way that would be both “every day” and for anyone, layperson and specialist alike. However, even these few examples remain rather

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., xv.

¹⁵⁷ Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” 108.

cursory, and consistently lack anything approaching the depth or rigor that Hadot methodically applies to contextualizing ancient practices of the self. In other words, Hadot's oeuvre lacks any systematic exploration and analysis of precisely those "contemporary spiritual demands" which he invokes via Friedmann in the first place. While both the logic of the ancient spiritual exercises that Hadot analyzes, as they are tied directly to the ancient spiritual demands that he so rigorously uncovers, and that methodology itself would together entail a comparably systematic study of the present, only the hint of such an approach appears in Hadot's work.

VI.i.a. "Postscript."

Instead, in the few instances that I have mentioned, Hadot rather consistently appeals to what appear to be a series of quasi-universalist generalizations, which can appear frankly confusing given the depth and adamancy of his historicism. For that reason, it is worth being as clear as possible on just what Hadot is and is not saying in these instances.

Take for example the question posed to him in the postscript-interview at the end of *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, conducted from April-May 1992 by the translator Michael Chase during the course of the book's translation into English:¹⁵⁸

M.C. Are spiritual exercises still possible today? They were thought up in the very distant past, as responses to specific social structures and material conditions, but our current living conditions bear very little resemblance to those of antiquity. The spiritual exercises of the Stoics and the Epicureans, for example, are the consequences of the basic hypotheses of each school: on the one hand, faith in the providential Logos; on the other, atomism, belief in chance, and denial of post-mortem existence. Nowadays, however, we may no longer believe in these hypotheses. Is it still possible to practice the spiritual exercises of antiquity, separating them from the systems of which they were a part, and substituting our own basic hypotheses for the outmoded ones of antiquity? Let's take the example of injustice. One of the greatest sources of pain for modern man is, I would think, the suffering of innocent people. Every day, the media overwhelm us with images of this suffering, and we witness it every day in the streets of our cities. How can we avoid giving in to despair if we no longer believe, like Marcus Aurelius, in a divine providence, consubstantial with ourselves, which arranges everything for the best, and ensures that injustices are only apparent?¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ See "Postscript," 285.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 282.

Because Chase poses several questions here, and Hadot answers each of them, it is worth being as precise as possible in understanding Hadot's answers.

It is telling that Hadot's first response, to the initial question of whether or not spiritual exercises are still possible today, is a reference back to the quotation from Georges Friedmann with which we began (the third reference to that passage in this collection). In citing Friedmann, Hadot states, "I think this testimony suffices to prove that spiritual exercises are being practiced in our day and age."¹⁶⁰ And that seems, strictly speaking and by all accounts, quite true. Hadot then continues, remarking that "Spiritual exercises do not correspond to specific social structures or material conditions. They have been, and continue to be, practiced in every age, in the most widely diverse milieus, and in widely different latitudes: China, Japan, India; among the Christians, Muslims and Jews."¹⁶¹ And while this latter point could be taken to be a kind of vague universalism, there is no claim, at least not here, to a universal content or meaning to given practices, nor even to shared practices. Rather, the point is that the practice of spiritual exercises is historically ubiquitous, and is not excluded by any cultural conditions, even as the specific forms that these practices take and the goals toward which they work are shaped by those conditions. All that Hadot is claiming here is that it is always and everywhere possible to practice some form of spiritual exercise, on the strict definition of that concept that he provides.

The more precise, and more important question that Chases poses to Hadot, even if only implicit in his own formulation, is that of *which* spiritual exercises are appropriate to contemporary life. That question has been ever-present throughout this chapter, in its more general form: Which spiritual exercises are appropriate to any given context—to the spiritual

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

demands, the diagnosis at issue—and how and by what standards to we determine an answer to such a question? This then, is my question: what kind of work would we need to do in order to determine that level of appropriateness, as well as determining the parameters of any attending work of translation that would be required?

This is, I take it, the force of the second part of Chase’s question, with specific regard to the example of injustice that he raises. Hadot’s answer is interesting, in that it tells us both a great deal and very little. He responds:

You give the example of injustice and the suffering of innocent people. For Marcus Aurelius, the fact that there is a providence (that is, simply, that there is coherence in the world), does not mean that injustice is only an appearance. It is quite real, and in his *Meditations*, Marcus often expresses against liars and the unjust. For him, the discipline of action consists precisely in acting in the service of the human community; in other words, in practicing justice oneself and in correcting injustices. Such an attitude is independent of any theory of providence. Besides, Marcus himself says, ‘Whether or not the world is ruled by reason (and thus by providence), don’t *you* act unreasonably.’¹⁶² He then goes on to add that if we *do* act according to reason, that proves that there is also reason in the world. This is proof that it is one’s choice of life which precedes metaphysical theories, and that we can make our choice of life, whether or not we justify it by improved or entirely new arguments.¹⁶³

Following the text of Hadot’s response closely, he certainly answers the exegetical portion of Chase’s question: we do not need to hold specific metaphysical commitments in order to address questions of suffering on the model of Marcus Aurelius. This point is important, because it is at least one of the conditions of the possibility of practicing spiritual exercises that are conceived of and delimited in one way in a certain context, in some other context. But this is about as far as Hadot’s response goes.

Hadot’s answer references Marcus Aurelius because Chase specifically uses the emperor as his own example, but I take it that Chase is setting up a contrast, an important one that he

¹⁶² This point is actually quite fascinating in terms of the story Hadot tends to tell relating a given conception of nature and the cosmos (the “is” of a given philosophical outlook) to ethics (the “ought”), and is worth exploring further in another venue.

¹⁶³ Hadot, “Postscript,” 283.

wishes to highlight within the question itself. We have on the one hand those particularly “modern” sources of pain and injustice, and on the other the ancient ideas and practices that Hadot so thoroughly describes throughout his work. I take Chace to be asking, even if only implicitly, not just *if* we can bridge ancient practices and contemporary conditions, but also *how* we would go about doing that. Something important, then, seems to have been lost in the space between question and answer here, which results in a kind of appeal to universalism in Hadot’s answer.

The problem is that there is nothing *contemporary* about either injustice or suffering. Indeed, it seems safe enough to say that these concepts are both sufficiently general and empirically ubiquitous, that we can indeed describe them as genuinely trans-historical features of the human condition. But my point is *not* that there is no value for us now in Marcus Aurelius’ thought that “the discipline of action consists precisely in acting in the service of the human community...in practicing justice oneself and in correcting injustices.”¹⁶⁴ Indeed, I very much agree with Hadot that this line of thinking and others like it remain quite compelling—if, in the last analysis, insufficiently specified. And *that* is precisely the issue: If the term *contemporary* does not simply refer to *any* demand that exists in our time and place, but rather those which are inextricably rooted in the unique *particularities* of our context, then Hadot’s answer, here and elsewhere, can only at best provide an exceedingly cautious and general first step, with much work to be done. At worst, the more precisely we come to understand the particular content of the term “contemporary” in a given instance, it may be the case that there is an entire range of issues that Hadot’s overall vision may not be able to address.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

Further still, Chase's question does seem to invoke the specificity of the present, and not just by asking if spiritual exercises are possible today. More precisely, he makes mention of the fact that "Every day, the media overwhelm us with images of this suffering,"¹⁶⁵ which can be read not simply as saying that there is suffering now as there always has been. Rather, that it is a particular problem for us that suffering is mediated via technological means that have never before existed—a theme that is very dear to Friedmann. As much as Hadot gives us, it is significant that what he says in response about Marcus Aurelius does not, and without important work cannot, address this specific aspect of the question. The problem is absolutely *not* that Hadot's thought has nothing to offer contemporary culture with regard to a question of this kind, but rather that the great deal that it does have to offer has—in his own writing at least—for the most part remained on a level of abstraction general enough to apply to many disparate contexts, rather than being *particularly* contemporary. Friedmann, as we will see, demonstrates the depth and importance of questions of this kind.

VI.i.b. "Dialogue."

There is at least one instance in which Hadot does address, in a negative way, some of the genuine differences between the ancient and contemporary contexts, by suggesting what might *not* be possible for us now. In *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, Davidson asks Hadot about the shift from a plurality of philosophical genres in the ancient world (dialogues, consolations, correspondences, and so on) to the dominance of the systematic treatise as the solely recognized form of philosophical writing. With specific regard to the practice of dialogue, Hadot says

From the narrow perspective of the universities, the goal is to prepare students for the study of a school program that will allow them to obtain a civil service diploma and upon up a career for them. As a result,

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 282.

the personal and communal relationship necessarily disappears, in order to make way for a teaching that is addressed to everyone, that is to say, to no one. Unfortunately, I think it is extremely difficult in our day to resurrect the dialogical character of ancient philosophy. It seems to me that this dialogical form of teaching can be realized only in communities of the type of the ancient schools, organized in order to live philosophy communally (*sumphilosophein*, as they used to say). Perhaps it is possible in communities of the monastic type, but I believe that in everyday life and in university life, it would be very artificial.”¹⁶⁶

In this case, Hadot’s conclusion is unequivocal: under the contemporary academic conditions that he describes, we cannot go back, and the possibility of dialogue as a way of life has been genuinely lost.

And yet, insofar as Hadot begins to specify those conditions here, to note the particular limitations and demands that they place on us, he also engages in exactly the kind of preliminary work required to formulate the kind of philosophical exercise that might be able to respond to them. And so rather than a kind of lament for something lost, we may re-imagine Hadot’s response to Davidson’s question: if we have lost the ability to dialogue—or rather, the framework within which dialogue may occur and flourish—what, exactly, should we do?

V. Conclusions.

The conclusions that I have drawn in this chapter do not necessarily preclude Hadot’s suggestion of looking to the ancient context in order to address contemporary spiritual needs. However, if there is something significantly unique about both contemporary culture and the demands that it produces, Hadot never exactly makes it clear why his own suggestion would bear greater fruit than the traditions that Friedmann invokes. If spiritual exercises work to address specific spiritual needs, and if it is true that (contemporary) spiritual needs are unique to a given cultural-historical context, Hadot seems to omit something about why he thinks the practices he

¹⁶⁶ Hadot et al., *The present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, 56.

speaks of are *specifically* applicable to our context and needs. In other words, I take it that it is precisely here that Hadot reaches the limits of his project.

In practical terms, this means that we still do not really know what the historical translation of spiritual exercises would actually look like for Hadot. This is again because we only have the small handful of instances in which the more explicit prescriptive project is enacted, which also lack any speculation about *how* the ancient practices he is clearly endorsing can or should be altered or augmented to meet contemporary needs.

All of these questions are important—indeed, Hadot shows us just why they are so important. The precise answers, however, are as I have demonstrated not to be found within his oeuvre, for better or worse. That being the case, more significant and immediate question is one of just how we are to understand the explicit and implicit resources that his oeuvre as a whole provides for answering the question he and Friedmann have raised. Hadot does indeed hope that his readers will “hear a call,” but the work of interpreting that call, and putting it into practice, is a project in itself—one that he must simply leave for others. What matters here is that Hadot does provide the conceptual and methodological foundations required for that undertaking. And it is Georges Friedmann, with whom we began and to whom I now turn, who meticulously demonstrates at least one way of doing this work, and putting that framework into practice.

Chapter 2. Georges Friedmann: *From the Great Disequilibrium to the Interior Effort.*

“I know that I write these words because I am injured.”

—Georges Friedmann, *Journal de guerre*, 27 March 1939¹

I. Introduction

I.i. An Unquiet Wisdom

In the introduction to his 1970 quasi-memoire *La puissance et la sagesse*, the French sociologist of labor and technology Georges Friedmann situates the collected reflections, field notes, and journal entries that constitute what he calls the “autobiography that I will never write,”² as follows:

But gradually, as this work advanced, these events, these collective and personal experiences, necessitated a series of disruptive reassessments on my part, which profoundly changed my plan. In 1945, straining toward a humanism capable of ‘*genuinely* transforming the human condition,’ I had not forgotten the moral conditions upon which its realization depended, although I had indeed placed them in the third row, after economic and social conditions. Today, without denying the role of these latter—far from it, one will note—the observation of our world led me to affirm the essential role of these moral conditions. After having, during my period of ‘naïve Marxism,’ [*marxisme naïf*] given a quasi-exclusive privilege to the ‘material’ dimensions of things, I began to perceive with greater and greater clarity the *spiritual* dimension, which is so despised today [*actuellement si méprisé*]; and yet, without it, there will never be a socialism with a human face.³

This work of reimagining the place of what Friedmann calls here the “spiritual” in general, and its relationship to the political in particular, emerge from a life and career dedicated to the investigation of human labor, our relationship to machines, the experience of war,⁴ and the

¹ Georges Friedmann, *Journal de guerre, 1939-1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 27 March 1939, 196.

² *La puissance et la sagesse*, 11; *ibid.*. Despite his importance in France as a sociologist of labor, his expertise on and work within the Soviet Union, the publication of his war journals and his long and deep engagement with the philosophical tradition (cf. his *Leibniz et Spinoza*, Gallimard, 1946), Friedmann remains little-known in the Anglophone world, with next to none of his work having been translated since his death in 1977. For that reason, all translations from Friedmann’s work are my own, unless otherwise specified.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴ See his Friedmann, *Journal de guerre, 1939-1940*, a text to which we will return.

question of revolution. That its importance for him is tied directly, indeed necessarily, to that life and that work, cannot be overemphasized.

And yet, despite their deep significance, it will remain unclear, at least at this juncture, just what Friedmann means when he speaks of the “moral” and “spiritual” conditions that he is compelled to re-situate, both in general and within political life in particular. What can it mean to speak of an ethics that we place neither in front of nor behind, but rather directly alongside the political—let alone one that not only deserves, but on a certain understanding *demand*s the appellation “spiritual?” That the language invoked here is not exactly clear for Friedmann either, and that at least one goal of the nearly 500-pages of reflections and meditations that make up *La puissance et la sagesse* is to achieve some clarity on the very terms that he invokes at the outset, is of course no coincidence.

The text traces and re-traces the political, intellectual, and ethical concerns that would mark his life and career, from their initial emergence in his childhood and adolescence, to nearly the end of his life:

And so here is a book that in no way hides its values, unbiased [*wertfrei*]. It navigates a counter-current, at a time when certain forces, whose historical determinations are evident, give rise on all sides to formal research whose point of departure is a de-valorization of all “human” content. After many years and many voyages on several continents, I began to feel the need for an “interior voyage.” We will follow the steps of this development here, punctuated by the fragments of the autobiography I will never write. You will find here, communicated by a man who has sought to understand—and not to hide—his own weaknesses and failures, some responses called forth by the great questions that he has attempted to live. (Readers will judge for themselves the extent to which I have succeeded.)⁵

Indeed, in following both the “exterior journeys” and the “interior effort”⁶ of his life and career, *La puissance* can be recognized, by his own description, its contents, and its structure, as a kind of spiritual exercise in its own right. But if it is the substance of *La puissance* to chart the

⁵ *La puissance et la sagesse*, 11.

⁶ See *ibid.*, 119.

“internal” parallel of this journey—with all its difficulties, errors, insights and flaws—our own understanding of its project relies on a sense of those “exterior” conditions and experiences which gave rise to Friedmann’s interest in what he calls the “spiritual dimension” in the first place. We will closely follow both of these journeys over the course of this chapter, though to ends slightly different from Friedmann’s own.

Early Life and Work. Despite, or perhaps thanks to, a comfortable urban upbringing and unparalleled education,⁷ Friedmann tells us that in his youth he was somewhat enamored with rural life: “at sixteen,” he says, “I wanted to become a farmer,”⁸ but this was not to be. Following a series of intellectual adventures⁹—including at least one famous misadventure¹⁰—over the

⁷ Friedmann was “doté de diplômes socialement valorisé,” as Isabelle Gourné puts it. (Isabelle Gourné, “Philosoviet’ Commitments and a Sociological Stance Between the Two World Wars: Georges Friedmann’s Political and Intellectual Role,” *Sociologie du travail* 54 (2012): 359.) See also Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 378. See also the biographical preface entitled “Georges Friedmann (1902-1977): ses œuvres, ses engagements, 1920-1939” by Edgar Morin, in *Journal de guerre, 1939-1940*, 25.

⁸ *La puissance et la sagesse*, 32.

⁹ During the period from about 1924 to 1930, Friedmann co-founded the *Philosophies* group, named for a journal he co-edited with the poet Pierre Morhange (1902-1972), and the philosophers Georges Politzer (1903-1942), Norbert Guterman (1900-1984), and Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991). This core group of five friends came together at the *École normale*, and was, he says, “closely knit by their trenchant views, their enthusiasms, their arrogant refusals, their revolts: one of them rich, the rest not at all.” (*Journal de guerre, 1939-1940*, 25-26. See also Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 56-71; *ibid.*) Friedmann himself was “the rich one,” and would attempt to use his inherited wealth to support the group’s various endeavors. Over the course of the end of the decade, the friends published four short-lived journals. The first of these, *Philosophies*, for which the group is still known, was on Friedmann’s account, “a review whose tendencies were ‘epic, mystical, metaphysical.’” (Friedmann, *Journal de guerre, 1939-1940*, 26. The six issues of *Philosophies* appeared between March 1924 and March 1925.) *Philosophies* folded after only six issues, to be replaced by the shorter-lived *l’Esprit*, which saw only two issues in May 1926 and January 1927 (Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985*, 61.). Although “no member of the group adhered to Marxism” (*ibid.*, 56.) by the time *l’Esprit* closed down at the end 1926, “the adventurers joined the ranks of the Communist Party,” (*ibid.*, 61.) and in turn founded a new publication project, “*la société d’édition Les Revues*,” in 1929. Continuing the quintet’s previous activities, the *société* published two short-lived journals: *la Revue de psychologie concrète* and *la Revue marxiste*. (Friedmann, *Journal de guerre, 1939-1940*, 26; see also footnotes 6 and 7.)

¹⁰ The group’s final attempt at publishing was again short-lived: both of the latter two journals were forced to cease publication for financial reasons, following the “*tragico-bouffonne*” events of the “roulette affair” (*Journal de guerre, 1939-1940*, 26, fn 9.) In 1929, Friedmann and Pierre Morhange lost a large portion of Friedmann’s inherited fortune, and thus the group’s funding, at the Monte-Carlo casino, to a con-artist claiming to be a fellow Marxist who would double their finances at the roulette table. Insisting that they wait outside because he could not properly concentrate with them present, the 27-year-old idealists never saw the man or Friedmann’s inheritance ever again. This absurd series of events remains the subject of speculation as to whether the man, “Spektor,” was a “run-of-the-mill swindler” or an agent of “the Parisian corridors of the Comintern.” For more details regarding “the affair,” its aftermath, and the subsequent history of its interpretation see Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co: A History of*

course of the late 1920s, Friedmann's lifework began in earnest at the opening of the new decade.

Around 1930, his focus became the first-hand study of labor and mechanization in both the socialist "east" and capitalist "west," or what he refers to as "the technological adventure of human beings in the 20th Century:"

I did not become a farmer. I chose instead (or did I choose?) to try and understand the technological adventure of human beings in the 20th Century. Over the course of 30 years, the lover of nature and solitude instead took to halls populated by machines, construction sites, the docks, mineshafts, and thermal power stations for his field of study. I passed a large part of the years of my youth and maturity in fumes, dust, and dins; in the middle of the thronging crowds of the cities and suburbs of the East and West, in the industrial zones of the 'Old,' 'New,' and 'Third' worlds. What a path; how many thousands of kilometers I must have wandered for the sake of inquiries crude in comparison to the methods that researchers now have at their disposal!¹¹

The physical or "exterior" ethnographic journeys described here constitute the substance and foundation of Friedmann's life and research. But this brief passage also names the central object of that work, "the technological adventure of human beings in the 20th century." And its "external" pursuit, through the ethnographic work that Friedmann began during this period, is the foundation of his desire to re-situate the "internal," spiritual dimension within a constellation of moral, economic, and technological concerns.

The "Technological Adventure." This foundational concept, the "technological adventure of human beings in the twentieth century," he later specifies, "corresponds to the acceleration of technological progress in the past century,"¹² although it does not simply denote

Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985, 61-62.; Friedmann, *Journal de guerre, 1939-1940*, 26, fn 9., and M. Trebitsch, "Les mésaventures du groupe *Philosophies* (1924-1933)," *La Revue des reviews* no. 3 (Spring 1987).

¹¹ Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 32.

¹² *Ibid.*, 108. Indeed, in making this point he eloquently articulates one of the fundamental and recurring problems of any discussion of spiritual exercises. It is also interesting to note that Friedmann thought that the coming digital society, which he foresaw in the 1970s, would simply be an extension of industrialization—and, moreover, could not be separated from the industrial means and forms of labor which would produce, for example computers, mine the materials that constitute them, etc. This is why, at least on a certain reading, his insights remain relevant for us today: "We are still living in this age, and it is unclear when it will end;" (*ibid.*) or as he more succinctly puts it, "The game is not over." (*ibid.*, 109.)

the fact of the industrialized landscape and technological change. It also necessarily refers to the consequences of those transformations in the experiences of human beings living and working amidst social, economic, and technological change on a scale, at a pace, and in forms that had never before been seen. Thus, under this heading, Friedmann gathers all of the varied forms of labor, the mechanical innovations, forms of stress and satisfaction, the personal experiences of workers, the economic conditions which give rise to and shape all of these other factors, among the other practices, places, and experiences, too numerous to list, that populate his writings. And although Friedmann implicitly and explicitly develops the idea of the technological adventure over a lifetime, it is present as a motivating concern from the very beginning of this period: “Interest in these problems, which have always seemed to me among the most important and disquieting of our epoch, concerning as they do humanity’s moral as well as its material future, had begun to engage my attention as early as 1930.”¹³

The Great Disequilibrium. However, given the ways in which Friedmann talks about this “technological adventure,” it is possible to read the concept as something which names a problem. “Technological adventure,” however, is in fact a purely descriptive term, a technical phrase that carries no *necessary* political or ethical content.¹⁴ The danger, the problem, that Friedmann began to identify as early as the 1930s *emerges from but is not synonymous with the Technological Adventure*, and is referred to in *La puissance* (indeed, it is the title of the book’s first section) as “The Great Disequilibrium.”¹⁵ It is characterized “by the increasing disproportion between, on the one hand, the multitudinous forms of power that technological

¹³ Georges Friedmann, *Industrial Society: The Emergence Of The Human Problems Of Automation*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1967), 21.

¹⁴ Indeed, to ascribe a negative valence to industrialization, mechanization, and technological change more broadly would be to profoundly misread Friedmann’s politics and political commitments, and thus set the stage for arguably more profound misinterpretations of his discussions of spiritual exercises, “the interior effort,” and their relationship to the “exterior,” material conditions in question.

¹⁵ See Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 15.

progress confers on human beings, and on the other the moral forces that we have at our command to truly deploy them in the service of both the individual and society.”¹⁶ In other words, the Great Disequilibrium represents a kind of political, economic, and ethical “crisis of adaptation” to the radical changes that constitute the technological adventure. Among its effects are forms of what Friedmann calls a “dehumanization” and “de-spiritualization”¹⁷ that intersect the material and spiritual dimensions of life and work in the technological milieu.

The Great Disequilibrium is thus the name Friedmann gives to his diagnosis of the spiritual demands faced by subjects living, laboring, and dying within the economic and moral conditions constituting the technological adventure of the 20th century. And it is therefore determinative of both the *telos* of the “interior effort,” and the concrete forms any practices meant to respond to those needs must take. These concepts are thus foundational for understanding not only his interest in spiritual exercises, but his understanding of what they are and what they can do.

From the beginning of his sociological career, Friedmann was already beginning to draw a close connection between the Technological Adventure and the Great Disequilibrium, even at the stage preceding his ethnographic journeys. Through that connection, and in turn, he was also already articulating conclusions about the relationship between the “interior” and “exterior” effort—of ethical practices of the self to political life and work. Friedmann’s conception of that deep connection is reflected not only in the analyses he provides, but the thoroughgoing methods he undertook in their pursuit. The latter included undergoing preparatory forms of technical training in order to be able to talk in greater depth and detail with workers, managers, and engineers on his ethnographic journeys. For just one example, “In 1932-33, I passed through a

¹⁶ Ibid., 23.

¹⁷ See Friedmann, *Industrial Society: The Emergence Of The Human Problems Of Automation*, 212.

rapid apprenticeship in machine-tools (lathe, shaping-machine, planing-machine, milling machine), an experience with machinery clearly indispensable in every respect.”¹⁸ Such training would lay the foundation for a methodological approach that would allow him to more accurately report, reflect, and analyze the experiences of laboring subjects. In this way, his description of *Industrial Society: The Emergence of The Human Problems of Automation*, one of his doctoral theses and most influential early work, can be taken as representative: “The facts employed here are almost exclusively direct testimony coming from workmen, foremen, engineers, and from the studies of industrial psychologists specializing in the human problems of industry, [of the latter,] frequently men who have themselves practiced the mechanized trades which they were studying.”¹⁹

The USSR. At the same time and to be sure, if Friedmann’s commitment to direct engagement with workers is reflective of methodological and ethical concerns, it is equally informed by the explicit political commitments with which he opens *La puissance*. All of these factors would mutually and reciprocally inform one another, and thus the larger trajectory it is my concern to chart here. A committed Marxist by 1930 and a fluent Russian speaker,²⁰ Friedmann made the first of several research trips to the Soviet Union from September-October of 1932.²¹ He returned to the USSR again in 1933 and 1936 to continue “his research into the organization of work in socialist countries and to facilitate further contacts...within Soviet

¹⁸ Ibid., 21.

¹⁹ Ibid. Or, as the editors of the English edition put it, “The fact that Professor Friedmann spent some years as a machine-tool apprentice serves to enhance the value of this broad intellectual perspective.” (ibid., 11.)

²⁰ Gourné, “Philosoviet’ Commitments and a Sociological Stance Between the Two World Wars: Georges Friedmann’s Political and Intellectual Role,” 359. Note that all translations from Gourné’s paper are my own. –DW

²¹ As Isabelle Gourné describes it, a result of his “repeated visits to the USSR and the ethnographic work that his mastery of Russian and political connections allowed him to conduct there, Friedmann became, within the universe of the French social sciences in the 1930s, one of the principle intermediaries with the USSR.” Gourné further argues that Friedmann’s position of intellectual “ferryman” between France and the USSR also allowed him to contribute directly to “the legitimation of Marxism in the French social sciences, even among Durkheimians who had proven resistant to the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels since the end of the 19th century.” (ibid., 360.)

intellectual circles.”²² This research would result in the publication of numerous studies over the course of the 1930s, including a comparative study of factory work in the USSR, France, England, Poland, and Czechoslovakia in 1934;²³ as well as philosophically and methodologically seminal papers like “Machinisme et humanisme,”²⁴ and “Travail et communion en U.R.R.S.”²⁵ in 1935. During this time, his research into labor and mechanization was supported in part by his involvement with numerous Marxist organizations, publications, and networks, both in France and abroad. Neither Friedmann’s relationship to Marxism nor to the Soviet project amounted, on any reading, to a simple armchair pastime.

Friedmann’s time in the USSR did not only color his relationship to the Soviet project, but his work and worldview on the whole. These visits would lay the groundwork for his later disenchantment with the Soviet State and with Stalin in particular—all while radically reinforcing his commitment to the ultimate goal of “socialism with a human face.” The editors of his *Journal de Guerre* note that “In August of 1936, Friedmann found himself in Moscow during the first of Stalin’s great show trials, the ‘Trial of the Sixteen,’²⁶ in which Kamenev and Zinoviev were implicated. All of the defendants were executed the day after judgement was passed. In *La puissance et la sagesse*,²⁷ Friedmann describes this event as having been a ‘decisive shock.’”²⁸

The “Friedmann Affair.” Despite that shock, however, Friedmann, like many, remained hopeful for the future of the Soviet project, and to that end his research and engagement with the

²² Ibid., 359-60.

²³ Georges Friedmann, *Problèmes du machinisme en U.R.R.S. et dans les pays capitalistes* (Paris: Éditions sociales internationales, 1934).

²⁴ “Machinisme et humanisme,” *Europe*, no. 151 (June 1935).

²⁵ “Travail et communion en U.R.R.S.,” *Europe*, no. 153 (Sept. 1935).

²⁶ This “Trial of the Sixteen” was held from 19-24 August 1936, and is also called ‘the Trial of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Center;’ not to be confused with the nearly-identically named “Trial of Sixteen” Polish military officers in 1945. (See *La puissance et la sagesse*, 249, footnote.)

²⁷ Ibid., 249; 72, footnote; 362-63

²⁸ Friedmann, *Journal de guerre, 1939-1940*, 60. See also *La puissance et la sagesse*, 249.

USSR culminated in the publication of *De la Sainte Russie à l'U.R.S.S.*, (*From Holy Russia to the USSR*) in 1938. In his preface, Friedmann describes it as “a book intended to serve the Soviet Union and the construction of socialism, without ignoring the errors and lacunae that are inseparable from such an immense effort.”²⁹ In spite of these earnest intentions, the book caused a scandal within Communist circles in for its retrospectively mild discussions of the “errors and lacunae”³⁰ of Soviet politics and culture in question.³¹ In the ensuing “*affaire Friedmann*,” and despite some support, Friedmann was abandoned and attacked by lifelong friends and former comrades, labeled a “Trotskyite apologist,” a “traitor,” and “class enemy,” among other repercussions.³² The *affaire* would lead to a decisive break with the PCF in 1938— “that was the end of my time as a ‘fellow traveler’”³³—though Friedmann would remain a committed Marxist and socialist for the rest of his life.³⁴

²⁹ *Journal de guerre, 1939-1940*, 56, fn, 1.

³⁰ As he writes a year later in his *War Journals*, “There is an immense critical work to be done, a critique completely stripped of all passion, by people who know both Marxism and the USSR well. On what points and in which ways has the latter departed from the socialism of Marx and Engels. Only such a critique will allow us to draw real lessons from the Soviet experience.” (ibid., 81.) Friedmann had taken himself to be doing just that work in *From Holy Russia*, and following not only the *Affaire*, but the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, he worried that such work would never be done, at least not in good faith, and not in his own lifetime.

³¹ For a fuller account, see §2.3, “The Academic Reception of *From Holy Russia to the USSR*” and §3, “The Georges Friedmann Affair: the Closing of the Space of Possibilities in the Communist World,” in Gourné, “Philosoviet' Commitments and a Sociological Stance Between the Two World Wars: Georges Friedmann's Political and Intellectual Role,” 366-72. See also Melnik-Duhamel, “L'Affaire Georges Friedmann,” *D.E.A. de l'Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris* (1985).

³² “Recensions of the book appeared not only in *Commune*, the PCF's cultural review, but in the political journals and organs as well (*Cahiers du Bolchevisme*, *L'Humanité*, *Russie d'Aujourd'hui*). This diversity of publications attests to the attention that Friedmann's book drew from communist leadership, above all from Maurice Thorez, whose archives include an entire dossier on the episode.” (Gourné, “Philosoviet' Commitments and a Sociological Stance Between the Two World Wars: Georges Friedmann's Political and Intellectual Role,” 368.)

³³ Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 272. See Friedmann's full note here for a more detailed description of his relationship to the CPF from 1930-1936, and a first-person account of the “affair” following the publication of *De la Sainte Russie* in 1938.

³⁴ On this point, Friedmann is adamant in several places, up until the end of his life: “Even today, at the height of a great ebb of dashed hopes, I in no way renounce the socialist project. To use the greatest possible reason and justice in the organization of society, the production and redistribution of goods, to reduce from the very beginning the inequality of the chances for goodwill and accomplishing oneself, to aid human beings (who must also aid themselves), to penetrate—according to one's will and means—the universe of knowledge and beauty.” (ibid., 280.)

The War Journals. In 1939, in the midst of the crisis around the publication of his book, France and Britain declared war on Germany, and another decisive experience began for Friedmann. In August of that year, Friedmann was “mobilized as a lieutenant, an administrative officer within the Health Service, assigned to the Hospital Complimentary Unit of Laon.”³⁵ The HC was a kind of mobile hospital unit,³⁶ and Friedmann would spend the next year surrounded by the sick and the dying as the HC made its way south and west through France, beginning at Laon on August 26, 1939, and ending at Gontaud on June 28, 1940. Friedmann’s journey through war and death is chronicled in his posthumously published *Journal de Guerre*.

The *Journal* is marked by concentric levels of reflection and observation: from observations of life during wartime, to a detailed description of the crisis of political and ethical faith provoked by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact—signed just over a week before Friedmann’s first journal entry on September 6, 1939. Here again, the political comes to directly intersect with the “interior effort” for Friedmann. From the earliest entries, he describes the *Journal* as a form of “examination,” that is uncannily familiar in its form to those spiritual exercises described by Hadot. Where Friedmann’s “examination” is different, however, is its central focus on a spiritual self-evaluation prompted by the historical and political specificity of industrial automation and the future of state socialism. And if Molotov-Ribbentrop prompted a crisis of faith, Pétain’s capitulation roughly a year later left Friedmann apoplectic, despondent, and Stoic, in ways that would directly re-engage and re-double his “interior-exterior,” spiritual-political efforts.

³⁵ Friedmann, *Journal de guerre, 1939-1940*, 29.

³⁶ The editors of Friedmann’s journals describe the HC as follows: “Beginning in 1939, the mobile Hospital Complimentary Unit (HC) operated within the general organization of the health service, at an intermediate level between the ambulances (cf. notes on pp. 207 and 218) and the evacuation hospitals (cf. note 2, p. 218). They were either assigned to an army corps, or, as was the case for Friedmann, to a communications hub—in this case, a regulation station (temporary railroad stations used to dispatch men and goods to combat areas). The HC was comprised of six doctors (possibly including specialists), two pharmacists, two administrative officers, and 130 nurses. It had a mixed function, both surgical and medical, with a capacity of 500 to 700 beds.” (ibid., 37, fn 1.)

Following the French Armistice with Germany on June 22, 1940, Friedmann maintained his *Journal* for roughly another week, until the 28th, where the final entry cuts off abruptly. On June 24th 1940, he writes: “my emotions have been given over, since yesterday, to alterations of indignation, revolt, inspiration, sadness.”³⁷ On that same day, he notes that “I...believed in this army, into which I was mobilized, and which I gave my full support (these notebooks carry the trace of that belief), right up until the disaster of the 15-17 of May. Following that, I have continued to do my duty, at my post, but without faith and without hope.”³⁸ Friedmann would continue to do his duty for just a little while longer, until that duty shifted. Soon after these events, he “took refuge in Toulouse, in the unoccupied territory, the *Pétainist* portion of France; finally, he engaged himself in the Resistance, side by side with his friend Jean Cassou”³⁹ beginning in 1940. During this time in Toulouse, through what he called “the somber winter of 1940-1941,”⁴⁰ Friedmann would make a number of important acquaintances. Through Cassou, Friedmann first met Violette Chapellaubeau, her future husband, the influential philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin, and her close friend Vladimir Jankélévitch.⁴¹ It was also during this time that Friedmann came to meet Swami Siddeswarananda (1879-1957) of the Ramakrishna Mission, through whom “India first crossed my path.”⁴²

Following the War, Friedmann was awarded the *Médaille de la Résistance*, with rosette.⁴³ He received his *Doctorat d'état* in 1946, with a major thesis entitled *Les problèmes humains du*

³⁷ Ibid., 292.

³⁸ Ibid., 290.

³⁹ Edgar Morin, “Préface: Il était minuit dans le siècle,” in *La puissance et la sagesse*, by Georges Friedmann (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 13.

⁴⁰ Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 229.

⁴¹ Morin, “Préface: Il était minuit dans le siècle,” 15. See also Françoise Schwab, “Vladimir Jankélévitch à Toulouse. 1940-1945. Une Parenthèse Inoubliable. La Guerre,” *Cités* 2, no. 70 (2017): 110.

⁴² Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 229.

⁴³ Reynaud Jean-Daniel, “Friedmann, Georges (1902-1977). Professeur d'Histoire du travail (1946-1959),” in *Les professeurs du Conservatoire national des arts et métiers, Dictionnaire biographique 1794 - 1955, A-K*, ed. C. Fontanon, Grelon, A. (Paris: Institut national de recherche pédagogique, 1994), 545.

machinisme industriel, and a minor thesis on *Leibniz et Spinoza*. Although the minor thesis remains untranslated, the major thesis later appeared in English as *Industrial Society: The Emergence of the Human Problems of Automation*.⁴⁴ It is considered a founding text in the French sociology of labor.

The entirety of Friedmann's academic career, from the end of the war to his death in 1977, is far too extensive to summarize here. In all of that time however, as Edgar Morin says, "he never broke from his focus on human labor, and on the workers themselves."⁴⁵ The direct, engaged, and empirical approach that he adopted as early as 1930, and the ethical-political motivations which drove that method and his work overall, would remain very much consistent throughout his life. They are also the foundation and the heart of his interest in and concern with spiritual exercises, or what he calls the "interior effort." And it is for that reason I have devoted such attention to these biographical details: Perhaps more so than any of the other thinkers I will engage here, we must understand Friedmann's life in order to understand his thought. What remains now, in some sense the basic task of this chapter, is to understand just *how* the philosophy of the interior effort shapes and is shaped by the sociology and politics of the "exterior."

I.ii. The Material Present

i. Over the course of *La Puissance et la sagesse*, Friedmann theorizes the potential efficacy of the previously ignored moral forces and "spiritual dimension" in this task of

⁴⁴ Friedmann, *Industrial Society: The Emergence Of The Human Problems Of Automation*. (For further biographical information, see "International Sociological Association Past Presidents: Georges Friedmann," ISA, International Sociological Association, <http://www.isa-sociology.org/en/about-isa/history-of-isa/isa-past-presidents/list-of-presidents/georges-friedmann/>).

⁴⁵ Friedmann, *Journal de guerre, 1939-1940*, 16, in the introductory section "Il était minuit dans le siècle," by Edgar Morin.

mitigating, and perhaps overturning, the dehumanization brought about by the Great Disequilibrium. And although the concepts that constitute his diagnosis of the spiritual demands that concern him are at least somewhat clear at this early juncture, the idea of what he calls this “spiritual dimension” meant to counter them remains vague at the outset of *La puissance*. This is in no small part of course because the specification of that category constitutes the task of the book as a whole, a text which both concerns itself with *and* stands as an example of the “interior effort.” And as a spiritual exercise itself, it is a book that is meant to be both open and honest, including those areas in which his thought is still unformed and vulnerable.

It is for this reason that Pierre Hadot was drawn to Friedmann’s work in *La puissance*, and why he would reference Friedmann’s invocation of spiritual exercises so frequently. But it is also here that Hadot and Friedmann begin to diverge, in at first subtle but ultimately important ways. Although Hadot’s broader project—and indeed his invocation of Friedmann—is motivated by the prescriptive goal of “offering contemporary mankind a model of life”⁴⁶ fit to address “contemporary spiritual demands,”⁴⁷ his exhaustive analyses stop just shy of the kind of “translation work” necessary to that goal. Hadot’s larger oeuvre *does*, however, demonstrate the necessity of that work, and in so doing provides a general sense of the necessary contours of such a project. In order to so much as describe properly contemporary spiritual exercises, fit to address properly contemporary spiritual demands, we must first define both the “contemporary” and the “ordinary” themselves. This is just one aspect of the foundational analyses required to move us from either the ancient to the contemporary, or from the specialist to the average practitioner. Hadot, on my reading, very clearly, demonstrates why such definitions are necessary, but ultimately leaves to others the work of providing a framework for understanding

⁴⁶ Hadot, “Reflections on the Idea of the ‘Cultivation of the Self,’” 208.

⁴⁷ “Spiritual Exercises,” 81.

how spiritual exercises could be integrated into contemporary forms of life, or how to determine what properly contemporary spiritual exercises might look like.

Friedmann thus differs from Hadot, and in some sense can be said to pick up right where Hadot leaves off, in two ways that are central to this project as a whole, and the elaboration of which will constitute the substance of this chapter:

The Present and the Ordinary. First, Friedmann’s discussions of spiritual exercises and the “interior effort” are explicitly contemporary and primarily quotidian. Friedmann’s entire sociological and political oeuvre can be understood as a specification of the uniquely contemporary conditions in response to which his interest in spiritual exercises emerges. Texts like *La puissance et la sagesse* and *Industrial Society* are thus equally philosophically and methodologically representative of his work more generally. Despite the specific focus on spiritual exercises and the “interior effort,” *La puissance* remains a text which characteristically concerns itself with the conditions of labor, technological change, education, war, and so on, in the mid-20th century, as the necessary foundation upon which any discussion of the former is taken up. Similarly, *La puissance*, like *Industrial Society*, engages but does not center religious or philosophical specialists, but rather the “spiritual needs” of average workers living within the economic, technological, and political conditions that he describes. Within the context of his work, these two factors—the contemporary and the everyday—are in fact inextricably linked.

It is again for this reason that *La puissance*, and indeed Friedmann’s larger sociological output, can be read as detailed descriptions of the particular spiritual demands *to which* any such practices must effectively respond. They can therefore be read as a model for the kind of thoroughgoing analysis required for the specification of the *particular forms that any practices of the self which seek to address those conditions must take*. Friedmann thus allows us to address

certain lacunae in the work of Hadot in ways that are both rich and precise. His work, therefore, also provides the next sure step in addressing the overall question of the politics of self-overcoming.

A Political *Telos*. Friedmann's project is fundamentally and comprehensively political. Where we can very roughly situate Hadot's concerns within the domain of ethics and philosophical accuracy, Friedmann's interest in spiritual exercises is political from the outset. This is the second major way in which that concern is reflective of his overall sociological project, as it is motivated by his observations of the large-scale effects of systemic technological change on the lives of the masses of workers. As we have also seen, Hadot's analyses focus on the spiritual exercises of specialist, and primarily ancient, philosophical practitioners. On this question of the role of spiritual exercises in the material and economic conditions of the 20th century, there is simply no parallel in Hadot's work (nor even in Foucault's for that matter) for this aspect of Friedmann's. As he says at the outset of *La puissance*, Friedmann's goal is to bring the "spiritual dimension" into alignment with the economic and political concerns characteristic of certain forms of contemporary Marxist discourse, a goal that is far afield of Hadot's concerns.

This political concern also motivates his wariness regarding the charge of "spiritualism," itself a political category for Friedmann, for at least three possible reasons: First, certain properly "spiritualist" views amount, as he says, to an abnegation of political responsibility. Even those forms of "contemplation" which would lay claim to an apolitical status, have political consequences despite their own self-understanding. Second, the effort to distance himself from spiritualism is also a way of specifying that he does not seek to reduce politics to "moralism," understood as its political counterpart, or rather consequence. Friedmann seeks to establish, through the integration of the "interior effort" into an analysis of "exterior conditions," a

structural politics that is not reducible to the mere aggregation of the ethical lives of individuals. Finally, a great deal of “spiritualist” doctrine is marked by a kind of nostalgia for romanticized and misrepresented forms of pre-modern or pre-industrial forms of life. This impulse runs directly counter to Friedmann’s ethical-political project, his Marxism, and his understanding of technological change more generally. We will return to the problem of nostalgia in great detail below.

Regarding the second problem however, that of moralism, as we will see in greater detail below, Friedmann also rejects the radical inverse of this moralism, the “naïve Marxism” he invokes above, in which the ethical lives of individuals are simply taken to be the byproducts either material conditions or political structures. While he does explicitly move away from what he calls the “quasi-exclusive privilege” he had given to “the ‘material’ dimension”—what he will call the “exterior”—he in no way rejects the importance of those conditions. The goal, rather, is to situate a political philosophy of spiritual exercises somewhere between the extremes of moralism and material-economic determinism.

However, Friedmann is in no way out to find a “perfect balance” at the center of the two: If Friedmann is no conservative, he is certainly no moderate or liberal either. Rather, his goal is to offer an ethical corrective, a re-balancing, from the inside of—and squarely on the side of—a resolutely leftist critique of the effects of rapid technological change under both Western capitalist modes of production *and* Soviet forms which have lost sight of certain Marxist first principles. His goal, after all, as he states at the outset of *La puissance* is “socialism with a human face” *not* liberalism. Friedmann may have abandoned his naivety, but never his Marxism; he thus seeks to offer an ethical corrective *within* that framework.

It is in part for this reason that Friedmann's political critique is already implicated in the ethical critique. The distinction between the "spiritual" and "spiritualism" is for him a political distinction, in that, on his view, it has political consequences. It is among my goals in this chapter to both explicate and develop this distinction as expressed by Friedmann. Insofar as it is ultimately a question of differing models of the relationship of ethics to politics, it will fundamentally contribute to the theoretical model constitutive of the broader set of investigations that make up my overall project here. But it is also here that we must be both extremely careful and extremely clear: we cannot conflate the ethical and political critiques, we cannot assimilate these concepts to one another, and we cannot simply assume that a critique of the ethical status of egoist spiritualism is itself already or necessarily a political critique. We may, after all, quite easily criticize "retreat" on purely ethical grounds, *without* engaging its consequences on the level of the political lives of groups and systems. Moreover, it is after all possible to formulate a conception that posits a sharp distinction between these two domains, and in which, therefore, there *are no* political consequences for ethical choices and actions.

I insist on this distinction, or rather the possibility of such a distinction, in order to highlight the fact that Friedmann himself *does not distinguish them*, and indeed sees them as intimately linked. We cannot understand what is interesting or special about either the *fact* that he links the domains of ethics and politics, or the *way in which* he does so, without understanding that it is entirely possible *not to*. And so it is not simply a question of identifying the fact that, for him, individual ethical retreat has social-political consequences. Rather, it is an issue of specifying the precise ways in which he conceives of that relationship, the reasons *why* ethical action has political consequences, and vice versa. Perhaps above all, in order to argue that the way in which he links these two domains does not amount to what I have already referred to

as the mere reduction of political life to individual ethical action in aggregation, it is important to see that this linkage is on his part an intentional one, rather than an uncritical or naïve assumption.

I.iii. Chapter Overview.

This chapter, then, will centrally concern itself with specifying Friedmann’s place in the development of those fundamental questions. Of the figures that I will address in this project, I believe that Friedmann provides the most robust and detailed model for the specification and analysis of “contemporary spiritual demands.” In a sense, Friedmann picks up where Hadot leaves off, and begins to provide the resources needed for addressing the questions with which the previous chapter concludes. Friedmann does not just argue *that* contemporary spiritual exercises must explicitly respond to contemporary spiritual demands. Rather, he demonstrates both *why* they must, and models the kind of work that must be done to understand just *what* those demands might be in a given case.

Further, his empirical, sociological analyses of “the technological adventure of human beings in the 20th century” and the “great disequilibrium” which emerges from it, provide an effective model for determining the spiritual demands particular to a given time and place. As I have already argued, this kind of groundwork is necessary in order to determine both how spiritual exercises could be integrated into contemporary life, and in turn the forms they would need to take in order to respond to the spiritual demands that emerge from the distinctive—rather than universal—aspects of that life. Even if the details, the precise definition of the “contemporary” in his work remain particular to Friedmann and to the West in the mid-20th century, the methodological model his work provides and principles upon which he pursues his

investigations are the most robust of all of the thinkers discussed here. Indeed, his “history of the present” may perhaps be more explicitly “present” than even that of Foucault.

However, in order to understand the ways in which this project can be generalized and integrated into a broader model for understanding the category of practices of self-overcoming, we will need a more precise understanding of the ways in which these and other aspects of that project fit together. Specifically, on the model that began to emerge in the previous chapter, we will need a much more robust and detailed sense of the diagnosis that Friedmann provides of the contemporary spiritual demands that emerge from the great disequilibrium and rapid pace of technological change. This will in turn allow us to understand whether, and if so how, Friedmann formulates a specific *telos*, a set of ideal principles, in response to those conditions. Finally, this larger dynamic will provide the foundation necessary for understanding exactly how the “spiritual dimension,” spiritual exercises, or the “interior effort” fit into Friedmann’s larger project, and above all, the ways in which their concrete iterations are shaped by the conditions in question.

II. From the “Technological Adventure” to the “Great Disequilibrium.”

II.i. The Technological Adventure of Human Beings in the 20th Century.

“The technological adventure of human beings in the 20th century” is the general name Friedmann gives to the object of his research, from the beginning of the 1930s until the end of his life. Even in the many cases in which the term itself is not explicitly invoked, it remains consistently and visibly present throughout Friedmann’s sociological, philosophical, and personal writings. It is a phrase that specifies something that is at once incredibly precise *and* incredibly broad. It denotes the *radical* and *ubiquitous* technological changes specific to the

early- and mid-twentieth century in the industrialized and industrializing countries of the socialist “East” and capitalist “West.” It further refers to the ways in which the penetration of these new technologies into all aspects of life, work, and leisure affect what Friedmann calls “human relations”⁴⁸ in general.

Friedmann argues that the changes that define the Technological Adventure are historically unique in both *form* and *degree*: the specific technologies themselves, the rapidity of their creation and dissemination, and the extent of their effect had never been seen before: “Human beings are now subjected to thousands of stresses, excitations, and stimulations never before known or seen. Every day, the ensemble of these technologies create, arrange, and further deepen, what I generally refer to as *the new milieu*.”⁴⁹ For Friedmann, this is not simply a formal observation, one that could be grafted onto any time and place. It is an affirmation that the specific content of that change matters, as it is wholly unlike any previous upheaval. This does not mean that past technological and social revolutions were not comparably dramatic, but that this specific “adventure” entails its own wholly unique challenges. It is not just *that* the world Friedmann finds himself thrown into is new—the world, after all, is always being made “new”—but that it is “new in new ways,” and that he is able to observe technical, social, and environmental changes that had never before been possible.

This thread is ubiquitous throughout his oeuvre. In the early and representative article “Man and the Natural Milieu” Friedmann devotes several successive paragraphs to short but effective overviews of the changes brought about by a range of new industrial technologies. This “ensemble,” which includes railroads, automobiles, airplanes, telephones and telegraphs, and

⁴⁸ Georges Friedmann, “L’homme et le milieu naturel: panorama du nouveau milieu,” in *Annales d’histoire sociale (1945), Hommages à Marc Bloch II (1945)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), 104.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

nascent household technologies,⁵⁰ “has transformed and continues, every day, to transform the conditions of human existence.”⁵¹ Within and beyond the workplace, “At every moment, life is further penetrated: it is a vast phenomenon which will not cease to advance, to further integrate itself into new areas of the life of work, home, the street, and leisure.”⁵² And the worker, departing the factory at the end of his shift, “barely steps away from industrial mechanization when he is seized by the mechanization of transportation and leisure.”⁵³

The same is true for the agricultural worker and for rural life more generally. Indeed, the explicit goal of this short piece is to provide concrete observational data on the ways in which life and work are changing across rural France. Here he seeks to both identify and begin to fill in important gaps in contemporary sociological understandings of the place of mechanization in agriculture.⁵⁴ The Technological Adventure is thus not limited to certain geographic locations, cultures, or forms of work. Nor is it limited by time: “Along with the hours absorbed by productive work, machines have penetrated every second of the day, and even sometimes, in the great urban centers, the heart of the night as well.”⁵⁵

Despite its early date, “Man and the Natural Milieu” is very much representative of Friedmann’s broad sociological oeuvre. It also demonstrates the empirical origins of Friedmann’s central concerns, including the idea of the Technological Adventure. But these concerns are not limited to his sociological researches, and appear as well as an equally powerful thread in the more philosophical and personal writings. Indeed, over the course of 1939, the same

⁵⁰ Ibid., 103-04. (His remarks on the mechanization of leisure time on page 104 on are particularly interesting.)

⁵¹ Ibid., 105.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid. In this particular example, the worker in question is “Paul,” one of the ethnographic subjects of this study.

⁵⁴ See *ibid.*, 103.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Note that while full electrification had not yet reached rural France (the location of this particular study), Friedmann does not see that as being far off, and the paper is focused specifically on the ways in which new technological forms have penetrated rural life and work.

year that this article was published, Friedmann would experience a very different but in fact commensurate incarnation of the technological adventure, recorded in great detail in his *Journal de guerre*. And despite the thematic diversity of the *Journal's* widely ranging entries, Friedmann's sensitivity to that dynamic is perhaps best seen in the passages that describe life and work in the HC.

Take, for example, his third entry, dated 10 September 1939, which is already representative of life in the hospital unit over the course of the next year:

Since my arrival here, in the course of helping to prepare this HC (six hundred beds), the talk has been almost exclusively devoted to the means of combatting the effects of these new technologies of death. They have progressed in leaps from the landmines that have already so effectively served to populate our cemeteries: new gases, incendiary "Elektron" bombs, air power, these concrete and metallic "lines" upon which thousands of young lives will be shattered.

This fury has never yet ceased. Humanity is still so far from the moment on which we will become fully human.⁵⁶

Here, he identifies both the presence and effects of "new technologies of death," as well as the endless work done to so much as learn how to mitigate their effects. It is against this backdrop that, roughly a week later, Friedmann soberly remarks, "I have known since this morning that we will be here for a long time—excepting those who will disappear before the end—for a very long time. This HC, which we have established, will see days filled with sadness, with wounded and poisoned flesh."⁵⁷

But what Friedmann sees in the HC is *not only* death and injury, as they are brought about in ways that have never before been seen. Rather, the effects, the human wages, of these new forms inscribe themselves in places beyond the bodies of soldiers and the work of medical staff. They *also* give rise to an endless need to adapt or discard old medical practices, all while creating new ones, in order to develop and deploy new methods capable of addressing these new

⁵⁶ Friedmann, *Journal de guerre, 1939-1940*, 41; entry of 10 Sept. 1939.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 49; entry of 18 September 1939.

and unique forms of harm. Forms that are, in the very midst of the war, undergoing constant shifts and refinements: “The Germans have invented new engines, magnetic mines, etc. *Le Matin* wrote this morning that we must respond to them, we cannot indulge in a lazy optimism; to which they added, ‘The war is a continuous creation.’”⁵⁸

Forms of Change. The *Journal*, however, does not simply reinforce or reiterate the descriptions and analyses of the Technological Adventure that populate his sociological writings. It also provides deeper insight into the nature of radical change and transformation, as Friedmann understands them. Indeed, this material presents an opportunity for deeper theoretical reflection on the nature of social and technical change because the dire immediacy of the circumstances demanded it of Friedmann. It is in those passages devoted not to his work, but to the *landscape* at the front, in which Friedmann’s conception of radical change is perhaps best expressed, and which provide the best occasion for a deeper understanding of the ways in which past and present are linked within the radical newness of Technological Adventure.

In two early *Journal* entries, Friedmann documents the experience of traveling through the French countryside in order to retrieve supplies. In these missions, they would often pass several of the same cemeteries and monuments, all barely a generation old, dating from the First World War:

10 Sept. 1939

Coste⁵⁹ and I went to Reims by way of the national route: materials to recover, a lot of items “missing” from the bundles that we received. Raids at the Reims depots, complicating our ability to get the requisitioned goods....

Traveling, back and forth, through all of these villages, shores, hills, and forts whose names I had read so often in my youth,⁶⁰ in the reports of the previous war. Our driver, T., a farmer in the area, knows every last detail of the local terrain. Here, a group of fighter planes was destroyed by a nest of machine guns; there, an enormous, monstrous, and jagged-edged crater, recalls the two companies who fell upon a German mine in 1916; and along the route, here and there and there again, the great fields planted with neatly arranged

⁵⁸ Ibid., 103; entry of 23 November 1939.

⁵⁹ Dr. Fluorent Coste; see the biographical note in *ibid.*, 39. Friedmann spent a great deal of time with Coste during this period of the war.

⁶⁰ Friedmann was around 12 when Germany declared war on France in 1914.

crosses, draped with flags—the black and white crosses of enemies now so close; the monument to those killed in the tank brigades, those killed by trench mortars, the monument to riflemen. All of these names, which had until now only been names to me, now swell with images: Craonne, Berry-au-Bac, le Chemin des Dames. I want to hold myself back from considering this conflict from too great a universal perspective (*sub specie aeternitatis*), because although I (happily) find myself defending incontestable values and principles, in spite of all of their faults, I see the regimes and institutions of France and Britain with clear eyes. Nevertheless, how could I, returning from this ‘excursion,’ stop myself from thinking that 25 years later, humanity is yet again gripped by a new fury again itself? It is a truth that explains so many things: that fury never ceased. It was incubating.⁶¹

Roughly a month later, Friedmann again passed by some of the same monuments:

4 October 1939

We are still making our way to Reims, through the long, narrow passes made up of cemeteries, mine craters, landscapes stripped and all the more sinister in the grey autumn morning. Here is a monument to the dead from the tank brigades, then the infantry, and the cemetery for marine riflemen; here again the famous mine that devoured an entire brigade; and there a battalion of *territoriaux*⁶² who were killed on sight.

And here, once again, armies crawl across this dreadful landscape; the enormous machine of war has been stirred awake and made ready. We are here, and there, and among the occupants of this vehicle, I am the only one who was not here the *last time*... The car continues to traverse kilometers of these landscapes. I let myself go, the sadness is too powerful for me to respond to it: feeling of the uselessness of all of this, horror at both institutions and passions which, after a quarter-century, will reproduce and renew, worsen the destruction and increase the slaughter.⁶³

We see in passages like this a subtle, perhaps gentle, though striking awareness of a series of contrasts, the familiar, perhaps eternal, “machine of war,” and its new iterations. In this way, we also glimpse the concentric layers through which Friedmann’s insight passes. The remnants of the last war dot the countryside, and its technological legacy visible each day in the HC. And yet, in being so visible, Friedmann is able to clearly gauge the changes that have come about since then, in wholly new forms of warfare. Each day, he witnesses the effects of technologies which both emerged from and far outstrip their forebears. And they do so in concentric layers that were not lost on Friedmann. Indeed, these observations are important because they allow us to further specify his understanding of the nature of the technological

⁶¹ Friedmann, *Journal de guerre, 1939-1940*, 39-40.

⁶² “Régiment d’infanterie territoriale”

⁶³ Friedmann, *Journal de guerre, 1939-1940*, 65.

change that constitutes the technological adventure—with an emphasis, however subtle, on the dynamics of *change* specifically.

In *Journal* entries like these, Friedmann is wholly aware of his place in a tragically ahistorical human experience—a fury that “never ceased,” but was instead “incubating,” and which, it seems, will always return. And yet, it was known even at the time, and certainly by an expert in machine culture like Friedmann, that the First World War had been in many ways a wholly new experience. The “famous mine that devoured an entire brigade,” or the chemical agents which had populated so many of the graves in question, were as much proper citizens of the twentieth century as Friedmann himself—even as such technologies had origins in 19th century conflicts, from the American Civil War to the suppression of colonial subjects by the European powers.

Friedmann understood that these techniques could at once have roots in the past *and* perform wholly new feats of destruction in the present. Indeed, he saw the present conflict in precisely this way: as a force that had not only reproduced but *renewed* itself, as a “continuous creation.”⁶⁴ It had done so to destructive ends that had never before been seen—even as they clearly and recognizably emerge from a familiar recent past *and* take part in an unfortunately universal human experience. This “renewal” is thus representative of the technological adventure of human beings in the 20th century for Friedmann, not simply because it is constituted by the introduction and use of new machines, but because their devastating novelty results in a *crisis of adaptation*. It is precisely this feature of the Technological Adventure that gives rise to the spiritual-political condition that Friedmann calls *the Great Disequilibrium*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 103; entry of 23 November 1939.

II.ii. The Great Disequilibrium.

If “the technological adventure of human beings in the 20th century” is the name Friedmann gives to the central object of his sociological research, the “Great Disequilibrium” is the name for the constellation of *contemporary spiritual demands* that Friedmann sets out to diagnose and address, arguably across all of his writings. These are in fact the very demands of which Hadot poses the question of the potential role of the spiritual exercises of Greco-Roman antiquity. Much like the technological adventure, the constellation of symptoms that comprise “Great Disequilibrium” are already visible in Friedmann’s earliest work. Whether explicitly named or not, the Disequilibrium is especially present in his studies of mechanization, automation, and the effects of rapid technological change on “human relations” in the 20th century and their resulting dehumanization.

Again, the Great Disequilibrium is *not* defined by that technological change itself, but by the crisis of failing to adapt to those changes, and its effects on the inextricably linked spiritual and material well-being of the human subjects caught up in it. As he puts it in the Preface to the American edition of *Industrial Society*:

“It is evident that, among the ills from which humanity suffers in the 20th century, one of the most serious is the lack of understanding of the structure and effects of the new environment into which men have been plunged during the last century and a half by the rapid development of a technical civilization....The destiny of machine civilization, born of the application of science to society, everywhere provokes uneasy speculation, exacerbated by the material and moral chaos into which humanity has been plunged by two world wars.”⁶⁵

Here and elsewhere, Friedmann already speaks of the disequilibrium in terms of a material ill, one with “moral” consequences and “spiritual” wages. But Friedmann does not *simply* seek to diagnose the disease: his work, like all medical research, is carried out in the service of discovering and implementing a healing regimen. Thus, “The problems of mechanization must

⁶⁵ Friedmann, *Industrial Society: The Emergence Of The Human Problems Of Automation*, 17-19.

be grasped where they arise, observed and even experienced in their true nature. The various sciences from which they derive must be studied in order to judge the evils, and to define the remedies (if such exist) and the conditions under which the latter may operate.”⁶⁶ If ever there was an apt description of what Friedmann sets out to do in general, this is it.

II.ii.a. Labor and Dehumanization

The imbalance, the crisis of adaptation, that defines the Disequilibrium is first and above all by what Friedmann refers to as the *dehumanization* of workers and, as a consequence, everyone. *Industrial Society* is perhaps Friedmann’s most thoroughgoing work on these questions, and its conclusions are representative of his views even toward the end of his life. The text is blunt and unambiguous in its views, and Friedmann’s concerns are readily apparent from the very chapter and heading titles: “Fatigue,”⁶⁷ “The Working Environment”⁶⁸—which includes sub-sections on the problems of “Temperature, Humidity, and Ventilation,”⁶⁹ “Light,”⁷⁰ and “Noise and Vibration,”⁷¹—“Accidents,”⁷² “Problems of Monotony,”⁷³ and so on. These sections describe, in almost excruciating detail, the precise ways in which all of these conditions bring about the forms of dehumanization particular to the Great Disequilibrium. He describes the phenomenon known as “industrial fatigue,”⁷⁴ and the “stupefying” effects of noise⁷⁵ on the factory floor in comparable detail. On the descriptions of the workers themselves that Friedmann

⁶⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 77 (Part One, Chapter III).

⁶⁸ Ibid., 93 (Part One, Chapter IV).

⁶⁹ Ibid., 93.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 94.

⁷¹ Ibid., 97.

⁷² Ibid., 108 (Part One, Chapter VI).

⁷³ Ibid., 129 (Part Two, Chapter I).

⁷⁴ See *ibid.*, 84-85.

⁷⁵ See *ibid.*, 100.

speaks with, all of these factors and conditions serve to reduce human beings to mere machines, and they are but a handful of the factors in the constellation of potentially dehumanizing features of life and work on the factory floor.

These are just a few examples of an enormous and complex constellation of conditions and effects that Friedmann analyzes. Indeed, his writings are dotted with examples of “the worker in mass-production workshops” who appears as “a raw material in the midst of other raw materials,” and for whom “the agonizing problems of the dehumanization of labor” are a central feature of daily life.⁷⁶ They should, for that reason, suffice for providing a general understanding the concrete forms of dehumanization that concerned Friedmann, as there is no space or need here for a detailed rehearsal of the full breadth of his sociological and historical observations of the spiritual-material building blocks of the Great Disequilibrium.

Scientific Management. However, part of the ongoing diagnosis of the Great Disequilibrium in Friedmann’s sociological oeuvre consists in the analysis not only of industrial conditions themselves, but in the already existing attempts to adapt to new industrial transformations. Indeed, over the course of *Industrial Society*, Friedmann exhaustively details the intersections of the work itself with the overarching theories and practices of “rationalization” which marked industry from the end of the nineteenth- to the first half of the twentieth-century.⁷⁷ In fact, some of the clearest examples of the reproduction and amplification of the Disequilibrium are to be found in the system of “scientific management,” whose then-ubiquitous dominant form was developed by the mechanical engineer F.W. Taylor, which Friedmann identified as a root cause of so much of the misery he observed throughout his life.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ibid., 54.

⁷⁷ See *ibid.*, 30.

⁷⁸ See *ibid.*, 37, 261, 74.

Despite Taylor's ambitions of bringing "harmony, not discord"⁷⁹ through the "the application of science to industry," or "mathematics applied to the organization of industrial labor,"⁸⁰ the most efficiently-produced byproduct of the system seemed to be the misery of workers laboring in industrial conditions that were already inherently dangerous. Part of the problem, as one critic put it, was the fact that "Taylor was first of all an engineer; he knew the mechanism of the lifeless machine but not that of the living motor."⁸¹ Thus, "The increased productivity sought by Taylorism is obtained less by rationalization than by *intensification* of work. The performances achieved by exceptional workers are, with very slight reductions, demanded of the mass of their comrades with no guarantee that the latter can maintain this effort for any length of time."⁸² Simply put, "The very expression, 'human motor' ...suggested some confusion with certain tendencies of Scientific Management. In the industrial worker the latter had seen primarily the *motor* and very little of the *human*."⁸³ Taylor's triumph is of course only rivaled by that of Henry Ford, who notably "congratulates himself on the fact that the new technical means have 'eliminated human art from this operation.'"⁸⁴

Friedmann's critiques of Taylorism's claims to the status of a science are as thorough as they are withering, if at times subtle, throughout *Industrial Society* and elsewhere. Suffice it to say that, as Friedmann so dryly puts it, "the science of machine labor' perfected by Taylor was in any case, apart from any other assessment of it, not winning the approval and gratitude of those whom it directly concerned and to whom it claimed to bring easier work and financial satisfaction."⁸⁵ Or in the more blunt words of the American Federation of Labor, "the inhuman

⁷⁹ Taylor, *Principles of Scientific Management* (140), in *ibid.*, 41.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸¹ Atzler, in *ibid.*, 54-55.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 55.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

and hideous system' called Taylorism after its inventor 'reduces human beings to the condition of mere machines.'"⁸⁶ Others simply referred to Taylorism as "organized overwork,"⁸⁷ which produced nothing more than "the loss of all initiative in the worker who was turned into an automaton and a moron by the Taylor system."⁸⁸

But while Friedmann levels these criticisms at Taylorism specifically, he does so because the latter is representative of the field of "scientific management." He thereby also takes these concerns to reflect the situation within the entire field of automated industrial labor: apply equally to the Fordist factory *and* comparable systems in the USSR. Thus *any* attempts, Taylorist or otherwise, to "rationalize" industrial labor will only exacerbate the Great Disequilibrium, by pushing workers further toward the status of machine, and further from their humanity.

II.ii.b. The Milieu and the Cycle of Adaptation.

The forms of dehumanization that emerge directly from machine-labor are symptoms of the Great Disequilibrium, and are indeed constitutive of it. But so are the attempts by forms of scientific management to adapt labor to the conditions in question, thus contributing to and reinforcing that condition. Scientific Management is, in itself, an attempt to adapt to the new industrial circumstances, and in failing, only exacerbates the Disequilibrium brought about by those circumstances. They are in the last analysis just different aspects of the same cycle of imbalance, the same crisis of adaptation. In this way, Friedmann's criticism of Fordism and Taylorism are illustrative of the cascade effect produced by the Disequilibrium: a set of

⁸⁶ Ibid., 262.

⁸⁷ In Germany, one Dr. Sachs published an article in 1913, criticizing Taylorism "in terms which strikingly recall those of the militant members of the French General Federation of Labor (CGT), which had just then accused Taylorism of being 'organized overwork.'" (ibid., 42.) Another critic, Lahy, "observed as far back as 1916" that "scientific management is a constant appeal to overwork." (ibid., 53.)

⁸⁸ Ibid., 43.

conditions arise that are already disruptive in themselves, and the forms of organization emerge in response to those conditions only exacerbate that imbalance.

There is, on Friedmann's understanding, a reason for this. In *Industrial Society*, Friedmann argues that "The determining laws of an epoch sweep along the most powerful individuals in spite of themselves."⁸⁹ Or as he says in "Man and the Natural Milieu:"

"Human beings are not the same, we do not feel, behave, or think the same according to the epochs of our history, to the environment within which we live, and the technologies at our disposal....In an ancient adventure in which causes and effects jumble together and reciprocally condition one another, human beings condition our environment, and through our environment, we modify ourselves, set forth toward new transformations. There is no continuity in this march, nothing unilinear; civilizations are born and die. Some stagnate, far from the techniques discovered by other human groups. They pursue their destiny without knowing others, [...] that which, today, has become nearly impossible: technological civilization, by the prodigious means of diffusion at its disposal, is in some sense totalizing. [...] The mentality of individuals in a human group is inseparable from the total ensemble of the conditions of existence particular to the state of knowledge, technology, and language available to them, and through which they express themselves. Today, the most logical thought is maintained, in its vocabulary and syntax, even for those minds that are the least permeable to scientific things, by the machinery that rational thought has been able to develop for almost the past three centuries."⁹⁰

Friedmann's assessment is rooted in an understanding of the reciprocal relationship between the effect of human labor upon our (built or natural) environment, and the subsequent impact of those changes and that work back upon us. In other words, *when we labor upon our world, we labor upon ourselves*.

The problem then is that the radical content and pace of technological change have unbalanced the cycle of change and adaptation to those changes:

With the emergence of technological civilization, our environment has begun to constantly and profoundly evolve: a torrent of technological changes, world wars and social wars, the fever of everyday life. No possibility has the chance to truly clear a new path, or to fix itself in a stable set of behaviors—in instinct. The stimulations which issue from the technical milieu multiply themselves in a way that is superabundant, disordered, and chaotic. We can say the same thing for the reactions which correspond to them within the individual, on the level of sensibility and action. What had constituted the principal fabric of our psychic lives, in the natural milieu, has been diminished or even disappeared without having (not yet anyway) been replaced.⁹¹

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹⁰ Friedmann, "L'homme et le milieu naturel: panorama du nouveau milieu," 106, 12.

⁹¹ *La puissance et la sagesse*, 41.

It is for this reason that Friedmann is not only concerned with the exponential pace of technological change, but the political, social, and psychological effects of our ceaseless and fruitless attempts to adapt to it. Indeed, it is the inexorable feedback-loop of the effect that our labor has on *the very conditions under which we subsequently labor* that is now marked by imbalance, and which has produced the condition diagnosed as the Great Disequilibrium. Thus our failure to adapt—and to so much as *know how to adapt*—to the Technological Adventure of the 20th-century results in a disequilibrium between “the power and non-control of technology, and the debility of moral forces,”⁹² specifically the forces necessary for us to control the products of our labor and prevent them from controlling us.

The overwhelming nature of the technological change which we ourselves have brought about has caused us to lose control over both our own works and the conditions under which they are produced. It is for this reason that he devotes dozens and dozens of pages of *La puissance* to innumerable examples of what he simply calls “The Power of Things over human beings,”⁹³ which can be anything from the privileged example of nuclear weapons,⁹⁴ to automobiles,⁹⁵ to the effects of all of these technologies on human biology⁹⁶ and psychology, to any of the other “technological horrors” personally witnessed or reported to him during the war, in the post-war West, in the Soviet Union, and so on.⁹⁷ He also refers to this compromised situation under the

⁹² Ibid., 65.

⁹³ Ibid., 44.

⁹⁴ “The most convincing proof of the Power of Things over human beings today is to be found in our attitude with regard to the nuclear menace.” (ibid.)

⁹⁵ See ibid., 59-60.

⁹⁶ “The progress of scientific and technical knowledge (each so effected by the other) has brought about for us, *as living organisms*, a number of consequences, though there is no need to enumerate them all here. I will content myself to highlight the variety of biological transformations which can be observed in the new milieu of industrialized societies.” (ibid., 39, emphasis added.) He then goes on to speak about birth and death rates, infant mortality, life expectancy, changes in age of puberty and menopause—all phenomena which are, tellingly, either identical to or reminiscent of those which Foucault inscribes within the concept of biopolitics.

⁹⁷ See ibid., 48-49.

general heading of “man inferior to his works,”⁹⁸ which corresponds with the spiritual political *telos* he identifies in one of the final sections of *La puissance*: “man superior to his works.”⁹⁹

However, it must be just as clear that Friedmann’s understanding of the relationship of human beings, our subjectivity, to the technological and natural milieu, and what I have called the “cycle of adaptation” that is necessarily tied to it, is still a neutral analytic category:

Human beings change. Our manner of thinking is no less variable, relative, tied to the ensemble of conditions of a civilization than our manner of sensing and perceiving. The logical processes of thinking among the contemporaries of Luther are not the same as those who visit the cinema or fly in airplanes. The natural environment which dominated Western Europe since the 16th century had a concurrent mentality, different from that of the inhabitants of the new milieu.¹⁰⁰

For Friedmann, this claim has no necessarily political or ethical content either way. Indeed, the formal role of these insights is more akin to that of the Technological Adventure than the Great Disequilibrium, which again emerges from but is not synonymous with the former.

I emphasize this neutrality because it is at once the *cause* of the Great Disequilibrium *and* the condition of the possibility of its spiritual-political resolution: “I do not believe, and I emphasize this here in order to avoid any misunderstanding, in an immutable human nature. In dominating the environment that we are given, human beings are able, reciprocally, to aid in our own transformations, our ascent towards our own heights—our humanization.”¹⁰¹ This view at once gives Friedmann a causal explanation for the physical and spiritual misery he has observed from the trenches of the Second World War to the “machine halls and mineshafts of East and West,” *and* give him hope for the future. It is *only* insofar as a relationship such as this is a source of certain problems that it can also be a means of remedying them.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 39.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 406. Indeed, “Man superior to his works” is the title of section VII. of Part 5, “*Élever la voix*,” of *La puissance et la sagesse*.

¹⁰⁰ Friedmann, “L’homme et le milieu naturel: panorama du nouveau milieu,” 112.

¹⁰¹ *La puissance et la sagesse*, 42.

The question now becomes, in turn, just what the treatment might look like—and perhaps more importantly, why Friedmann comes to believe that “spiritual exercise,” and the “interior effort” are necessary and integral to the process of *humanization* that he hints can counter the Great Disequilibrium. As Friedmann himself concisely puts it in *La puissance*, “Can we suppress, or at least reduce, the Disequilibrium which thus results for human beings? And if so, by what means? These are some of the questions to which this book will attempt to respond.”¹⁰² But very much like the question of spiritualism—indeed, tied directly to it—in order to understand what Friedmann’s view looks like, as well as the reasons for which he comes to hold it, we must also understand just what his vision necessarily excludes.

II.iii. The Futility of Nostalgia

The dehumanizing effects of labor under the Great Disequilibrium are sometimes accompanied by, though analytically distinct from, what Friedmann refers to as the *de-spiritualization* of work. The great systems of “rationalization,” whether Fordist, Taylorist, or otherwise, were at the time predictably exacerbating that phenomenon: “Unfortunately, the trend of rationalized labor towards ‘despiritualization’ (*Entseelung*) takes a totally different course.”¹⁰³ Where “dehumanization” roughly refers to the assimilation of the human being to a kind of machine, de-spiritualization refers to something slightly more precise, though they are closely related. In Friedmann’s usage, de-spiritualization refers to a kind of disconnection of the worker from his work, in which the machine becomes something other than an extension of the worker’s body and subjectivity. The machine, the tool, becomes something that stands *between* human

¹⁰² Ibid., 23. We can in some sense read *La puissance* as Friedmann’s final attempt to answer the positive political and ethical questions his concrete sociological research had been posing to him his entire life.

¹⁰³ Friedmann, *Industrial Society: The Emergence Of The Human Problems Of Automation*, 212.

beings and the objects of their labor: “In de-spiritualized work, the close bond between the worker and the task is loosened, sometimes even broken.”¹⁰⁴

In practice, de-spiritualization codes the historical shift from artisanal work to automated labor. On the model of artisanship,

Between human beings and the elements, nothing seems to interpose: it is close to them, things or beings, animals, tools, wind, land. The carpenter conceives and executes, plane in hand, sculpts, sands, varnishes, and finishes his work, all while, in so doing, debating with himself the merits of his own practice. Nothing separates him from his material, his work. Taking his tool in hand, his hand is extended, he knows it, adapts it, fashions it to his grasp. The tool is an extension of his body, his skill, and his art.¹⁰⁵

This kind of labor, in other words, “requires that man be present to his work. The work itself is still coextensive with human motion, technical efficacy with tools.”¹⁰⁶ Now, although it is entirely possible to take these descriptions as merely romantic hindsight, the experience of de-spiritualization on the part of workers is born out in the first-hand testimonies Friedmann reports: “Another worker, Watson, an old mechanic, reproaches Taylorism especially with having taken from the worker the responsibility for *his* tools, and *his* machine.”¹⁰⁷

The problem, however, with the discourse of “de-spiritualization,” tied as it is to a certain, perhaps romantic, understanding of artisanal labor, is that for this very reason, it is easy and intuitive to link a notion of “spiritualized” work directly and necessarily to certain specific *forms* of labor. And to be clear, Friedmann does very clearly believe that artisanal labor is characterized by a “spiritualization” that was being lost: “Mechanization has once more deepened the opposition between work and culture, which, in certain of his activities, the medieval artisan had reconciled. The ascendancy of the community over the individual has

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 390. The question of the relationship of this concept to Marx’s notion of alienation is far too complex to address here, and must be set aside for future study.

¹⁰⁵ Friedmann, “L’homme et le milieu naturel: panorama du nouveau milieu,” 106.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 114.

¹⁰⁷ Friedmann, *Industrial Society: The Emergence Of The Human Problems Of Automation*, 263.

apparently strengthened these contradictions.”¹⁰⁸ Friedmann is, to his credit, aware of the distinction, and clearly works to avoid conflating the two. The problem is that such a reading can and has (more often than not) led directly to a nostalgia for “the world which immediately preceded the technological civilization,”¹⁰⁹ medieval artisanship, and indeed “non-technological” forms of life more generally. In other words: a romantic nostalgia for forms of life and ways of working that either no longer exist *or* never actually existed as they are currently imagined in the first place.¹¹⁰

Friedmann does genuinely see de-spiritualization as a problem, as one form of dehumanization characteristic of the Great Disequilibrium. Moreover, it is clear from his earliest works that it is a problem that he believes can and must be solved. But as for any solution that is predicated on a nostalgic “return” to something, whether real or imagined, he wants no part:

In his *Cours d’Economie politique*, François Simiand quotes the opinion of a business leader who is highly devoted to propaganda for rationalization: ‘This very day, in contacts with artisans, blacksmiths, and locksmiths, I recognize with deep admiration the share of technical knowledge and human experience possessed by these true artists, and reflected that it would be a national loss, a decrease in national capital, to force such men to work in a shop where they would perform an automated task.’ And Simian, agreeing with this opinion, adds that in these old trades there is ‘to a certain degree and under certain circumstances not an inferiority but a superiority which should be preserved.’”¹¹¹

Friedmann’s response to all of this is unequivocal: “‘Superiority?’ Certainly. But is there anything more than a *pious wish* in this value judgement concerning the observable facts of modern large-scale industry?”¹¹² The problem, put slightly differently, is the association of a certain *relationship to work* to both certain *forms* of work and a vision of the past *characterized by* those forms of work.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 241.

¹⁰⁹ Friedmann, “L’homme et le milieu naturel: panorama du nouveau milieu,” 106.

¹¹⁰ As he says, “No one, then, can deny that human labor involved many repetitive and subdivided operations before the time of mechanization.” (*Industrial Society: The Emergence Of The Human Problems Of Automation*, 132.)

¹¹¹ Ibid., 209.

¹¹² Ibid.

In a short passage in “Signs,” the first chapter of the first part of *La puissance*, and under the telling sub-heading of “An Irreversible March,” Friedmann succinctly describes the critical valance of both the Technological Adventure and the Great Disequilibrium. Here he does not simply provide another definition, but more importantly identifies the causal relationship between the two, and specifies the political and ethical consequences of each. It is quite telling that it is in this context that Friedmann specifies the critical and prescriptive goals of the book:

Technological progress is irreversible. The stage of human history that we have entered, and whose pace increases in a rush before our eyes, is in no way comparable to any past age. It is an Adventure of wholly unique character. No technology is either good or evil in itself; all in fact contain *possible* benefits. How then, and under what conditions, can something which is not bad in itself, and which is even *potentially* good, become harmful to human beings? How is this baleful potential, what Elton Mayo called “*the seamy side of progress*,” realized? Doesn’t the experience of the 20th century confirm the responsibility for these evils which Marxism attributes to “capitalist” modes of production?

Can we suppress, or at least reduce, the Disequilibrium which thus results for human beings? And if so, by what means? These are some of the questions to which this book will attempt to respond.¹¹³

Technological change, which includes changes in forms of work, is the basis for the Disequilibrium, but the latter is a *contingent, historical—and in no way necessary*—consequence of the former. This means that industrialization and automation can serve human beings, or they can be sources of dehumanization, depending centrally but not exclusively upon the conditions of production in all their complexity. Both Friedmann’s ethics of spiritual exercises *and* his politics of “external conditions” rest on this understanding, as does his way of conceiving the relationship between the two.

Thus despite the rather dire tone of his descriptions from *Industrial Civilization* in 1946 to *La puissance* in 1971, Friedmann is equally and consistently clear that this is in no way a

¹¹³ Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 23. We can in some sense read *La puissance* as Friedmann’s final attempt to answer the positive political and ethical questions his concrete sociological research had been posing to him his entire life.

lament for something “lost,” but rather a *diagnosis* of his (our?) present situation, and thus the exigencies particular to it:

I do not believe, however, that we are now merely experiencing a new episode of the same grand misery that has trundled its way through history. This misery, this impoverishment, has always been profoundly embedded in *a society*, in *a culture*. Though a fact of civilization, it is not and cannot be the same, for example, in the United States in 1970 and in the medieval West.... Today, it is tied to the Great Disequilibrium, from which emerge the varying differences in its depth and extension, according to time and place. All tolled, the manifestation—which imposes itself with tragic evidence—of a moral underdevelopment in industrially evolved societies corresponds to the acceleration of technological progress in the past century.”¹¹⁴

These *specific* problems, these particular questions, could never have emerged before, because the conditions which have produced them have never existed before. Friedmann is neither a luddite nor a romantic, and when he poses the question, “Doesn’t the experience of the 20th century confirm the responsibility for these evils which Marxism attributes to ‘capitalist’ modes of production?”¹¹⁵ we cannot confuse this *description* of the problem with an *endorsement* of a nostalgic call back to some past form of life, no doubt suffused with its *own* particular troubles and dangers:

...nostalgia for the past only merits a brief halt. Ineluctable technological progress, the universe that surrounds us, summon us to continue on our journey. The present is rich with possibilities, and in the tumult that comes with it, old virtues founder. An equilibrium—imperfect, and limited to certain privileged zones, but which had the virtue of existing—disappears, and another has not replaced it.¹¹⁶

We cannot go back, nor should we.

We cannot because technological change is “An Irreversible March”—a telling subheading which appears in §I. *Signs*, of Part I., *The Great Disequilibrium*, of *La puissance*.

This is not a naïve teleological claim, nor is the important point here that change itself is

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 108.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 23.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 28.

inevitable (though he certainly holds that view).¹¹⁷ Rather, one implication of the inevitability of change is the fact that all times and places carry with them their own particular problems, challenges and dangers. A utopian nostalgia is not merely impractical and unrealistic, it is undesirable because it amounts to trading one set of problems for another—and without the benefits that new forms of work, modes of production, and so on *do indeed* carry with them.

Thus we *should not* go back because. Friedmann is quite clear, “Technological progress is a good when it delivers human beings from pain and slavery.”¹¹⁸ Thus, “Despite all of the evils from which free time now suffers, there are today men, women, and even young people, who understand how to benefit from the new instruments that have been placed in their hands by technological progress: the latter being, I repeat, indifferent to the uses that one makes of it for better or for worse.”¹¹⁹ At the same time, he is under no illusion regarding the real problems, and thus real challenges, that these changes necessarily bring with them. The point is, simply and again, that technological change is neither good nor bad, but rather at once inherently promising and inherently dangerous:

Milling machine, transfer machine, cranes, digging machines, computers, Rolleiflex cameras, washing machines, transistors, submarines, automobiles, cars, space ships—not a single one of these ‘machines’ *can* be used in the service of human beings, of our bodies and minds, without compromising our health, our freedom, our understanding of the world. And yet, at the same time, they all possess the capacity for aiding us in passing, in the words of the sage, from a lesser state of perfection to a superior one. Even assembly-line work (a form so passionately discussed in terms of the division of labor) can be beneficial in certain economic and social conditions, *if* they are combined with precautions which neutralize their dangers.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ As he puts it in one of the final sections of *La puissance*, “Discovering a New Sense,” “Today, in a world in which different civilizations are being rapidly standardized from one antipode to another, across continents, in an ineluctable movement that grinds down traditional differences, I cannot understand how it is possible to speak of “rediscovering the sense of life.” It is not a question of rediscovery or revival, but of new discovery.” (ibid., 403.)

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 17.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 97. See also his cautious endorsements of many of the other technological facts of contemporary life, and the potential for human flourishing that they *can* carry with them, but which are so often dismissed outright: “It is necessary to study, with a sympathy denuded of any superiority complex, in accepting the potential values of a ‘mass culture,’ entirely different from that of classical humanism, the goods of cultural consumption diffused by the *mass media*.” (ibid., 115.)

¹²⁰ Ibid., 19. Many thanks to Marie McDonough for her help in translating this very challenging passage.

Elsewhere, in the concluding remarks of *Industrial Society*, he describes the “magnificent possibilities” of the humanization of industrial labor:

The theory of automation gives hope to the total disappearance of unpleasant work, the relocating of workers driven from industry by technical progress in other skilled occupations, and the transformation of the man at work into a sort of demiurge or creator, making and minding machines. But these are technicians’ abstractions which the actual evolution of capitalist societies since the beginning of this century has cruelly contradicted. Complete automation is full of wonderful promises: freeing the worker from these subdivided tasks (in which he is half-absorbed by the machine), from assembly-line labor henceforth assigned to mechanical appliances, distributing consumption goods in great quantities, increasing comfort, shortening the working day for all, creating leisure for everybody, and consequently the means for attaining dignity and culture. But here again, technology and the suggestions of the human factor which tend to control its application in industry bring only a magnificent *possibility*; man, alone, through the social and economic organization in which techniques are integrated and oriented, can decide the degree to which this possibility may become actual.¹²¹

It is from *this* perspective that Friedmann asks, at the end of Section I of *La puissance*, “Could we succeed, at a different stage of organization and wisdom, to overcome the physical, psychic, and social evils that [the Great Disequilibrium] has multiplied? For our species, the “enthusiasm” of our Technological Adventure is hardly a century old; so very little time. Was Marx in fact more correct than the theoreticians of post-industrial society in situating his own époque within the prehistory of humanity?”¹²²

The task is thus to identify the conditions under which that promise can be developed, and the means to suppress those dangers. But it is a task that is possible: In maintaining that we are shaped by forces “outside” of ourselves, Friedmann also maintains the possibility of actively and consciously engaging in that shaping. Indeed, such a conclusion follows directly from his understanding of human being, labor, and milieu. If in laboring upon the world, we labor upon ourselves, and if our goal is to alter the results of that labor in some way, we must first

¹²¹ Friedmann, *Industrial Society: The Emergence Of The Human Problems Of Automation*, 384. See also his concluding remarks on mechanization, (*ibid.*, 389.)

¹²² Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 109.

understand the *particular* dynamics of these processes within the *specific* conditions in which we find ourselves.

In other words, in order to respond to the problem in any meaningful way, we have to describe it first: “Here in the final third of the 20th century, we engage in the technological Adventure particular to us at a moment so fraught with dangers. How can we overcome those dangers without understanding them—without studying them?”¹²³ If indeed, “The Technological Adventure forces human beings to invent new forms of life, to discover a new sense of one’s life: invention and discovery,”¹²⁴ what are the criteria, the standards, the values by which we can best pursue these forms of invention and discovery, in order to arrive at the *telos* of our “humanization,” rather than simply reinforcing the cycle of Disequilibrium? If appropriate “means” must be appropriate to *these specific questions, problems and conditions*, how must we tailor those means, our tactics and strategies, in response?

III. From Exterior Solutions to the Interior Effort.

III.i. The Limits of Exteriority.

Friedmann’s first attempts at addressing the Great Disequilibrium were characterized by what he calls a certain “exteriority.” Given his diagnosis of the origins of the situation in the fundamentally material conditions of technological change, and the goal of achieving “the humanization of technology,”¹²⁵ in which “the machine is adapted to the person (and not the inverse, as has been and remains so often the case),”¹²⁶ it was reasonable to assume that scientific, technological, and economic responses would more than suffice:

¹²³ Ibid., 42.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 404.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 118.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 114.

In brief, I had accorded the social and biological sciences the power to work together toward the humanization of work, attacking—*by way of external remedies* [emphasis added]—the evils which come from uncontrolled (un-dominated by human beings) mechanization, which menace the physical and psychic equilibrium of human producers. I had faith in the ability of science to come to the aid of the body and spirit of working human beings, to defend them from the effects of anarchic and rapacious industrialization.¹²⁷

As we have seen however, Friedmann came to see the limits of such strictly “exterior” approaches: “The “exterior” remedies which have been recommended in order to humanize, insofar as is possible, both work and leisure time are, certainly, worthy of discussion.... I continue to think that they can, together, provide great benefits. But I see now the limits of their efficacy much more than I had at first.”¹²⁸ Such means do have a role, but a very specific one: “Exterior remedies constitute our defense against these dangers. But in this New Frontier, we must engage in an *offensive*, though quotidian, form of combat, an endless struggle within the indefinite field which calls to us: the mastery of technology, its humanization.”¹²⁹ It is thus his understanding of the *means* by which the Great Disequilibrium must be addressed that shifts.

The USSR, Revisited. Regarding that shift, Friedmann’s emerging skepticism for political, statist, and technological responses is rooted first in his deep relationship with the USSR. The political and personal horrors of the era of Stalin “Cast a crude light upon the disequilibrium between political power and the moral misery of those who have so atrociously abused it in the name of a doctrine of justice, proclaiming the reconciliation of human beings with ourselves.”¹³⁰ But the point is not that the gulag is for Friedmann a damning indictment of socialism *tout court*, or of its ideals. He does not abandon Marx or Marxism, and he does not recoil into moralism. The issue is rather that *beyond* the more spectacular political troubles of Soviet life, in its mundane, quotidian, goings-on, it became clear to Friedmann that “The

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 116.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 124.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 117.

dominant values of technological civilization exercise their corruptive force just as much in Moscow as in Washington, in Paris as in Beijing.”¹³¹ On his observation, the respective “technological adventures” of East and West in the 20th century had far more in common than partisans of either form of economic life would care to admit.

The Great Disequilibrium was not simply a Western problem, but was also evinced in many of the same ways, and for many of the same reasons in the Second World: “The fundamental traits of a technological milieu comparable to that of the Western societies had already appeared within the “socialist patrimony.”¹³² In other words, both the *political and technological* aspects of the socialism he saw first-hand as a young man, and observed from abroad until his death in the 1970s, had failed to achieve the “human face,”¹³³ the “*nouvelle morale socialiste*,”¹³⁴ he worked so thoroughly to describe. And if that political domain which was founded upon the very principle of the rectification of the relationship of human beings to our labor, *within* a modern, technological and industrialized context, could fail so spectacularly to achieve that balance, then Friedmann would conclude *not* that socialism was hopeless, but that there was something overly simplistic about his own reasoning:

In light of these repeated shocks, I came to understand that my quasi-exclusive interest in “exterior” remedies had been the expression of a relatively simplistic scientific materialism. [...] This form of scientism is no more justified than any of the others. These ‘exterior’ remedies are useful, certainly, and even necessary, but not sufficient. Bad institutions are not solely responsible for the ‘limits of the human factor.’ These limits are inscribed within human beings themselves. As with our physical, social and psychic environment, it is upon human beings and from human beings that we must reflect, and provoke action.”¹³⁵

¹³¹ Ibid., 102. He seems (and *La puissance* is less explicit on this point) to want to tie the top-down political problems of the USSR to the presence of the Great Disequilibrium of life and work in the Second World as well, although because the text is so vague on this point, I hesitate to attribute such a strong, and potentially reductive, causal claim to him here. There is certainly a relationship between mundane life in the USSR and the terror of Stalin for Friedmann, but he never explicitly spells it out for us. The important point is rather, again, that technological change in the 20th century resulted in a form of imbalance within both daily and larger political life in the USSR comparable to that of the West.

¹³² Ibid., 116.

¹³³ Ibid., 10.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 117.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 117-18.

Now, if these limits are inscribed within us, that inscription is itself the result of the complex and reciprocating relationship between laboring subjects, the work we do, and the work that is done to us: “Labor, such as it is carried out every day by the masses of workers, of employees, constitutes a vast terrain in which the ‘conditioning’ of human beings by our new milieu takes place.”¹³⁶ And if those conditions effect our responses to them, in the work that we do and the way we do it, any work on our part to shift the terms will require somehow “stepping outside” and re-approaching the cycles or patterns within which we find ourselves, in even the smallest way: “In order to control our new milieu (that is, to “humanize” it), we are compelled to make choices. But in order to make those choices, we must rely upon values and the people who live them. How can we break from this circle?”¹³⁷ Thus on this account, if “exterior” conditions (and “conditioning”) produce “interior” effects, and vice-versa, then to meet our material conditions only on the level of their materiality is to fundamentally misconstrue the nature of the dynamic in question, and to thereby impair the development of a response that is either effective or just.

In other words, insofar as any wholly or primarily “exterior” attempts to redress the effects of the Great Disequilibrium remain caught up precisely within the Disequilibrium—shaped, and re-shaped by it—those systems will either simply fail, *or* further exacerbate the Disequilibrium itself. It is for this reason that attempts to adapt to the radically new landscape of the technological adventure of the 20th-century, attempts as wide-ranging as Scientific Management and Soviet state socialism are subject to many of the exact same forces and problems. And it is why the goal of humanization requires an interior effort: “Our spiritual

¹³⁶ Ibid., 114.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 124.

forces, save for some exceptional cases, are not yet in a state to address these conditions, and yet only they can save us, by aiding us in the mastery of our new milieu, and thus liberating us from it.”¹³⁸

What is required is a way of engaging and re-shaping the subjects laboring under the Great Disequilibrium, such that the cycle itself is shifted not simply toward “humanization,” but toward new *forms* of humanization appropriate to the technological milieu. Subjects who, in laboring on themselves, labor on the environment such that the conditions newly produced do not cycle-back in an uncontrolled way that continues to reinforce and exacerbate dehumanization and alienation. It is also for precisely these reasons that the “interior effort” required cannot—or at least, cannot *only*—be a general one. The spiritual exercises required to meet these needs must be tailored to these needs and conditions, and cannot simply be imported from other cultures, great religions, or even classical antiquity whole cloth.

III.ii. The Interior Effort

It is for these reasons then, which I have sketched far too briefly here, that Friedmann finally comes to the conclusion that the kinds of “exterior” solutions to the disequilibrium—which again is itself in large part a *material* imbalance—wrought by the kinds of technological, economic and thus social change in contemporary life, must be met with what he calls an “interior effort:”

In highlighting both the necessity and insufficiency of “exterior” remedies to the difficulties that have emerged in a technological society, both within work and outside of work, we have at the same time revealed the need for an *interior* effort in order to bring our own technical progress under control, and thus to ensure the moral and physical future of our species. It now becomes a question of studying the chances, the limits of such an effort, and, through these reflections, to discern the forces capable of reducing, and perhaps one day suppressing, the disequilibrium, of which we have already taken note of many signs.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Ibid., 98.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 118.

However and again, it is in no way a question of spiritualism; the goal is to “re-situate” the relationship between interior and exterior, *not* to prioritize one over the other: “In order to attenuate or suppress the Disequilibrium, we must call upon both ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’ remedies.”¹⁴⁰ *That* is the challenge that emerges from Friedmann’s diagnostic work, and it is not an easy solution.

And yet, *La puissance* is not so much a prescriptive text as it is a preliminary analysis and diagnosis: “I have no pretension however of providing a ‘system’ here, or of drawing up a structured and exhaustive list of values. Any such values would need to emerge from the critical observation of this new milieu and thus, in a manner of speaking, have directed my attention ‘to the terrain.’”¹⁴¹ There is thus no universal or trans-historical form of “interior effort,” nor can the internal work of differing times and places be simply re-purposed for the exigencies of another—not without the kind of thoroughgoing assessment he describes here, and a rigorous translation of given forms of life, practice, and belief based firmly in such analysis.

Indeed, among the dangers of proceeding without such rigor, he identifies the specter of precisely that spiritualism and its moralist political counterpart from which he and the other writers that I have invoked work to distance themselves:

Some of course have sensed the need to cultivate new spiritual forces in contemporary man, but very few among even those are oriented in the only constructive direction: to search for these new forces *in and through the recognition of the technological progress in question*, through what Karl Jaspers calls a “loyalty” to the realities of the 20th century. Lacking that loyalty, the denunciation of the dangers of technological progress so often devolves into a mythical nostalgia for the past, which in turn leads, as the case may be, to a global rejection of modernity, a negative and desperate attitude, an escape into *spiritualism* or mystical comforts, and religious or secular forms of retreat from the world.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 408.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 118.

¹⁴² Ibid., 119.

We cannot simply exchange the exterior for the interior. To do so would be to continue to trade in a political and moral framework of mere opposition, which fails to understand the complexity of the relationship between these only seemingly distinct domains.

And so it is here that Friedmann finally sets out the task of *La puissance*, to discover a form of “interior effort” proper to contemporary life, in its ability to address the imbalance wrought by the particulars of technological change, without lapsing into a vapid spiritualism, useless nostalgia, or conservative moralism by failing to understand the complex reciprocal relationship between material conditions and “spiritual” life. As undeveloped as it ultimately is in the text, Friedmann’s conception abandons the former terms altogether: “Human beings are called today to undertake an interior conversion, one that is much more than a psychological adaptation to this new milieu. Only this conversion can allow us to take our own future in hand, to unlock it, at once on the level of the individual, of society, *and* of the species; a path of salvation, a new frontier, a long and decisive march.”¹⁴³ Or as he says a page later, “It is not a question of human beings learning to become God, but rather learning to become human.”¹⁴⁴

The question is, of course, *how*? And, moreover, what exactly would this “humanization” look like? For Friedmann, any real answer can only arrive at the end of *La puissance*,

But are these reflections, these regrets, in vain? Are we, today, given our mental and physical constitution, the state of our nervous systems and the state of our relationship with our new environment, capable of controlling these same machines, of actually dominating and subjugating them? Only at the end of this book will I attempt to discern the price of such an effort, and to determine the conditions under which, and the culture within which, we human beings may finally reveal ourselves as superior to our own works.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Ibid., 122.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 123.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 68.

Under this description, the text itself can be seen as both the reflection and product of a lifetime laboring to not merely answer these questions, but to painstakingly detail the conditions under which such questions must be posed, and the criteria that any such answers would have to meet.

III.ii.a. To “Re-source” Ourselves.

One of the most important and extensive aspects of this project within *La puissance* is a kind of survey that Friedmann undertakes, and which constitutes the at-once thorough and admittedly insufficient substance of Part III of the book, entitled “Où nous ressourceur?”¹⁴⁶ Here, Friedmann poses the following question, one of the central questions and tasks not only of the book, but of the larger project of “re-sourcing” ourselves within the Great Disequilibrium:

In what way, from which religion, which doctrine, which social movement, can human beings today, draw upon for the moral forces that will aid us in balancing the material power with which we have been so endowed, in order to truly control the latter? Over the course of this chapter, I will attempt, in keeping with my reflections, a brief review, which claims to be neither thorough nor exhaustive.¹⁴⁷

It is a “review,” more precisely, of four traditions: “Christianity,”¹⁴⁸ which primarily means Catholicism in this case; Judaism;¹⁴⁹ “Hindu Spirituality;”¹⁵⁰ and “Marx, Marxism, Communisms.”¹⁵¹ This selection certainly has some glaring omissions, at the very least in the absence of Islam and Buddhism, but there is very much a method here. Friedmann had substantive knowledge of and a personal relationship with all of these traditions and their practitioners. Catholicism was the “principle religion of France, the country which so liberally

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 179-281.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 181.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 183-213.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 214-27.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 228-47.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 248-81. The questions raised by the fact that Friedmann places “Marx, Marxisms, Communisms,” and “militant revolutionaries” in general, in this explicitly religious company are many, and their answers are not

welcomed my parents;”¹⁵² Friedmann’s own background was Jewish; he did not simply encounter Indian religions second hand, but engaged well-known Hindu practitioners directly during his time in Toulouse; and Marxism remained his adopted quasi-faith—one which had occasioned its fair share of both crises and revelations in his own life.¹⁵³ In this way, Friedmann remained ever the empiricist, in both his choice of traditions to engage and *not* to engage, and in the admirable precision and care he devotes to each in these impossibly brief reviews.

To each of the traditions discussed here, Friedmann poses the question with which we began: that of their respective ability to address to what I have followed Pierre Hadot in referring to as “contemporary spiritual demands.” In fact, and indeed, it is precisely this section of *La puissance* that Hadot refers to in his invocation of Friedmann at the opening of “Spiritual Exercises.” Recall that, after citing an important passage from Part V of *La puissance*,¹⁵⁴ Hadot offers the following reflections:

With the exception of the last few lines, doesn’t this text look like a pastiche of Marcus Aurelius? It is by Georges Friedmann, and it is quite possible that, when he wrote it, the author was not aware of the resemblance. Moreover, in the rest of the book, in which he seeks a place ‘to re-source himself,’ he comes to the conclusion that there is no tradition—be it Christian, Jewish, or Oriental¹⁵⁵—compatible with contemporary spiritual demands. Curiously, however, he does not ask himself about the value of the philosophical tradition of Greco-Roman antiquity, although the lines we have just quoted show to just what extent ancient tradition continues—albeit unconsciously—to live within him, as it does within each of us.¹⁵⁶

It is true, Hadot is correct, that there is something curious about Friedmann’s omission, but not for the reasons Hadot gives. As evinced in both *La puissance*¹⁵⁷ and in key passages in the

¹⁵² Ibid., 183.

¹⁵³ I bracket any commentary on Friedmann’s discussion of Marxism here due to lack of space, and because his discussions of the religious traditions in question are far more productive for my purposes.

¹⁵⁴ Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 359-60.

¹⁵⁵ Hadot’s use of the term “Oriental” here must, I take it, refer to Friedmann’s discussion of Hindu spirituality in *La puissance*. It is worth noting that Friedmann’s “review”—for whatever flaws it may possess—does not refer to “Oriental” traditions (and does not use the term “Oriental” at all) but to Hinduism specifically and by name.

¹⁵⁶ Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” 81.

¹⁵⁷ It is fascinating to note that one of the places in *La puissance* where Friedmann invokes ancient figures like Marcus Aurelius, Plato, and Epicurus, is in the midst of a discussion of Marxism. (See Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 359.) It is unfortunate that the limitations of the present work will not allow for a substantive philosophical engagement with that point of contact in Friedmann’s thought.

Journal de guerre, Friedmann was in fact very much aware of the philosophical tradition of Western antiquity, and of Marcus Aurelius and Stoicism perhaps above all.¹⁵⁸ The curiosity here thus lies not in his ignorance, but in such an omission given the depth of that relationship—if I am correct that Friedmann chooses the subjects of his “review” based on an intellectual confidence in his own ability to do so garnered from past study and experience.

At the same time, the omission in question is not actually as much of a problem as Hadot suggests, because Hadot’s language does not accurately represent Friedmann’s views in this section. Although Hadot tells us that Friedmann “comes to the conclusion that there is no tradition...compatible with contemporary spiritual demands,”¹⁵⁹ Friedmann does not actually say anything of the sort in *La puissance et la sagesse*, certainly not in Part III. And the reason has *everything* to do with the specificity, the definition, of precisely those “contemporary spiritual demands” which Friedmann’s lifework is devoted to describing and understanding. Instead, Friedmann’s “reviews” in Part III of *La puissance* are not concerned with determining the ability of a given tradition to respond to the spiritual demands in question, at least not on the level of the fundamental doctrines or practices of a faith. In fact, there is nothing inherently the case about any of these traditions that would *necessarily* preclude them from addressing said demands. Neither Friedmann’s investigations nor his conclusions concern themselves with adjudicating the sufficiency of a given doctrine in itself; he does not take sides, nor does he “reject” any tradition or group. Rather, his goal in Part III is not so much to come to any particular conclusions about Christianity, Judaism, or Hinduism, but to instead pose certain difficult questions *to* them: the question of their current ability, willingness, and any concrete efforts being made to help human beings adapt to and master the technological milieu.

¹⁵⁸ See *Journal de guerre, 1939-1940*, 280-81.

¹⁵⁹ Hadot, “Spiritual Exercises,” 81.

Catholicism. Of Catholicism, he wonders: “Is there, in the contemporary Catholic Church (encyclicals, pastorals, the orientation of the episcopacy, theologians, preachers, etc.) a reflection concerning certain effects of technological civilization, presumed dangerous for spiritual life?”¹⁶⁰ Friedmann’s approach here is empirical as ever, and the very text of the question comes directly from a “little questionnaire that I sent to several priests and laypeople, who I know to be both open-hearted and courageous,”¹⁶¹ in order to take the *general* pulse, as it were, of the contemporary church: “The responses given to these questions orient the reflections which follow”¹⁶² his reflections on the answers received.

Despite some discoveries that are promising to him in a very limited and preliminary way,¹⁶³ it is here that the tradition ultimately does indeed fall flat for him: “There are, unfortunately, very few theologians, and even rarer the Pope, who have considered the importance of these questions for the religion of the Church.”¹⁶⁴ But this is not, for Friedmann, ultimately a condemnation; it is instead a sober philosophical and sociological assessment, one that may also present itself as an opportunity, if only we properly understand the problem, and choose to address it:

Because the new milieu, the anarchy of which has already evinced its tragic aspects, cannot be mastered without the proper moral forces, because this combat will dominate our century, and without a doubt the centuries to come, it is in facing this challenge that Christianity can rejoin the great current of life which

¹⁶⁰ Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 184.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁶³ Friedmann does discuss the views of certain Catholic thinkers and leaders who are amenable to using new technological means to reach the faithful: Of Cardinal Emmanuel Célestin Suhard (1874-1949), Archbishop of Paris from 1940-1949, Friedmann tells us that “One of the consistent themes of his instructions is that the church must use forms of mass communication (television in particular) in the service of the Word of God, of spiritual life, and the universality of the faith.” (*ibid.*, 202.) And of Pope Pius XII, who remarked, regarding television, that ““Television allows us to discover ‘the stranger,’ wherever in the world, ‘another in himself, a brother, a man.’ It is ‘in the service of the truth, a continuous Pentecost.”” (*ibid.*) Remember, however, for Friedmann the simple use and adoption of technology is not necessarily an escape from the Great Disequilibrium; more likely that engagement is itself caught up within the imbalance, potentially exacerbating it as another turn of the wheel.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

“seems, for some time now, to have fallen by the way.”¹⁶⁵ The crisis of human beings in the societies of both West and East offers the Catholic Church (and the other Christian confessions as well) the occasion to discover a new motivation [*élan*].¹⁶⁶

The question then is one of the potential for the church and its members to recognize the problems that Friedmann diagnoses, and to both adapt traditional practices *and* perhaps create new ones marshalling the “moral forces” necessary for human beings to address the Great Disequilibrium.

Judaism. This is the consistent methodological and intellectual thread of all of the “reviews” that make up Section III of *La puissance*. Of Judaism, Friedmann poses a set of questions nearly identical to those he addressed to his Christian interlocutors:

The question which I must now ask myself is the following: can Judaism, here in the final quarter of the twentieth century, contribute to the wisdom of humanity, precipitated by the Technological Adventure, faced as we are by all of the evils and dangers of our times? If the answer is yes, which sources must it draw on, and to what extent?¹⁶⁷

Somewhat more precisely: Can “The ‘revalorization of Jewish mysticism,’” for example, “such as it is undertaken by the faithful today, aid human beings in controlling and humanizing the technological milieu?”¹⁶⁸ Much like Christianity, as he discusses it above, “Judaism now has several chances to rediscover an inspiration, to attract and hold the young, to shine toward the future.”¹⁶⁹ It is up to engaged practitioners to determine just how they will do so within the technological milieu.

Hinduism. Again and in turn, this is the conceptual thread that centers and shapes Friedmann’s discussions of Hindu Spirituality, such as he understands it. As noted above, Friedmann’s first real encounter with Hindu philosophical thought came in the fateful winter of

¹⁶⁵ See Friedmann on Lubac, *ibid.*, 468n.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 212-13.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

1940-1941, spent in hiding with the Resistance in Toulouse. Here he met Swami Siddheswarananda, of the Ramakrishna Mission, from whom he learned a great deal, and who he would visit again following the war.¹⁷⁰ Siddheswarananda introduced Friedmann “to the writings of the great contemporary gurus, above all the works of Vivekananda, his own teacher,” and those of the famed Indian revolutionary, poet, philosopher, yogi, and guru, Sri Aurobindo Gosh,¹⁷¹ which influenced Friedmann a great deal.

Friedmann’s “review,” of Hindu spirituality is again marked by an empiricism itself characterized by a commitment to the historical and material contextualization of the forms of thought and practice that he engages. Friedmann is clear, almost to a fault, of the limits of his knowledge of both Hinduism and contemporary India. Nonetheless, or perhaps precisely for that reason, he is adamant that the former can only be understood within the context of the latter: “In order to judge the possible role of Hindu spirituality in today’s world, we must *also* confront the real India today, as its best observers have described it, drawing upon the investigations of demographers, economists, doctors, and sociologists.”¹⁷² However, Friedmann’s empiricism here, the approach briefly sketched above takes on a somewhat double-significance in the case of India, insofar as its unique recent political history and status as a non-aligned country, intersect with its rich intellectual and religious history. Only on the other side of a rigorous investigation of the material and political (“exterior”) conditions under which contemporary Hindu thought and practice (“interior”) are taken up and shaped can one understand the potential for this tradition to address and disrupt the Great Disequilibrium.

¹⁷⁰ See *ibid.*, 229, footnote.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 241.

Nonetheless, in a preliminary way, Friedmann sees promise in the Indian thought he has encountered and the political and economic action he has observed. In fact, “Sri Aurobindo conceived of a complementarity between the ‘mechanical’ and the mystical,”¹⁷³ a model strikingly similar to Friedmann’s own ideal:

The encounter of these two currents, which interest me in particular here (*not* their juxtaposition, but rather their combination), could allow for the development of a ‘science with conscience’ on all of its levels, in all of its domains: this science, oriented toward the summit of humanity, controlled by our highest ambitions, whose absence so cruelly constitutes the greatest failure of technological civilization, and possibly its ultimate downfall.

Sri Aurobindo had hope that India could realize this synthesis.¹⁷⁴

In the same way that he addresses the other traditions reviewed in Part III, Friedmann poses the same question of the current ability of “Hinduism” as he understands it to mobilize the moral forces needed to address the imbalance that so concerns him. But Friedmann’s answer in this case is both commensurate with the others that he gives, *and* unique. Hindu spirituality may have the capacity to develop those moral forces, to “realize the synthesis” that Sri Aurobindo aspired toward, but it has not yet done so. Nor, more precisely, has the state of India done so. But here, Friedmann adds a level of specificity to his conclusions, in terms of a more precise delimitation of at least *one* criterion required to achieve that synthesis on a national level:

India has not accomplished the synthesis in question. But it has not done so because this is not the work of a single nation, nor even the work of ‘spiritual’ masters or communities, regardless of their grandeur or saintliness. We thus arrive again at the question at the heart of this book, and the response that the facts, as they present themselves, give to us: In order to vanquish the multiform Disequilibrium, as it manifests in both the opulent societies of the West or those of the Third World, in order to give rise to the necessary compliment of moral forces, the precious example of spiritual masters, from whatever quarter, is insufficient. It must be undertaken by an effort that is prosaic, quotidian, effective—by each of us. The ‘enlargement’ of the human domain will not be accomplished alone: it can only be obtained within the New Frontier, through the combat the Technological Adventure imposes upon us.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Ibid., 246.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 247.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

To be clear, “India” is in no way synonymous with “Hinduism;” not historically, and not for Friedmann. His language here can therefore be confusing: he wants to understand Hindu spirituality within the concrete economic, political, post-colonial, (etc.) contexts within which it is primarily practiced and developed—that is, within the state of India. That overlap is crucial and constitutive, and thus has everything to do with Friedmann’s conclusions. But the point is *not* that India has failed to achieve the synthesis in question because of some inherent doctrinal or practical inability to meet the spiritual demands in question. Rather, the promise is there, but the challenge has simply not yet been taken up.

However, here Friedmann also specifies the necessity of a form not only of *collective* action, but of *quotidian* practice. This particular distinction does not explicitly appear anywhere else in Part III, even if it is certainly implicit throughout *La puissance* and necessarily entailed by his political commitments. It is thus here that Friedmann unambiguously addresses what I have called the problem of specialists in my discussions of Hadot. Masters and models may be important, but their mere existence, even with mass influence, is insufficient. First and primarily because the spiritual exercises and interior efforts taken up by religious and philosophical specialists simply cannot be approached in the same way, for the same reasons, or in the same amounts of time by working laypeople. Moreover, they certainly cannot be taken up in the same way by those individuals and communities laboring within the new technological landscape, and whose lives, and that landscape itself, are caught up in the dehumanized and de-spiritualized turn of the Great Disequilibrium. Above all, because these are the lives that primarily labor upon the environment, and in turn upon the conditions which constitute not only laboring subjects, but all human beings in a given political, religious, or technological community, it is the practice of non-specialists, the rank and file, which must take precedent on this account. While specialists

certainly play a role—that much is also clear from Friedmann’s engagement with them, in all kinds of traditions—they are not, ultimately the answer. What is required instead is the proletarianization of spiritual exercises.

This claim is implicit throughout *La Puissance*, and is indeed logically entailed by both his political commitments and the focus of his sociological lifework (themselves intimately linked, as we have seen). Unfortunately however, it is *only* explicitly discussed in this brief set of passages, within a very brief discussion of the intersection of politics and spirituality in contemporary India. Indeed, it remains completely unclear why the way in which Friedmann’s vision requires something much more foundational than the exemplary lives of religious experts, should only appear at this juncture, as the same claim could just as easily be made with regard to any religious tradition or spiritual regimen, including and perhaps especially Judaism and Catholicism. Friedmann also fails, again by his own at least implicit standards, in his interrogations of these traditions, to look at the ways in which they are currently or are potentially capable not simply of addressing the spiritual demands of the technological milieu, but of doing so through the everyday, quotidian spiritual exercises of average people. (He certainly had the skill, training, and expertise to do so).

All of that being said, at issue here is ultimately “The difficulty...to accept science and technology *and* to mobilize the moral forces necessary to master them (thanks to a new wisdom), without breaking with the mysticism [that we draw upon to do so]—be it Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or Vedantic.”¹⁷⁶ Is any tradition, group, or party willing and capable of effectively disrupting of the cycle that feeds and exacerbates the Great Disequilibrium, through the integration of an interior effort that exists *with and alongside* efforts toward necessary “exterior”

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 222.

or material transformations? Is it possible, and if so by whom, to produce spiritual exercises tailored precisely to the spiritual demands of the technological milieu that are, thanks to the *forms that they take*, capable of transforming, of *humanizing*, practicing subjects?

In other words: what must be done, and what can be done to replace the cycle of the Great Disequilibrium with a cycle of humanization? Can such “interior efforts”—mass, collective efforts—operate such that they constitute the first steps in the creation of *new human beings*, whose material labors *in turn* contribute to the production of a *new milieu*, capable of *again producing new human beings*. Human beings that are no longer “inferior” to our own works, who control the technologies that we create and are no longer controlled by them, and who are increasingly capable of further contributing to the endless work of our own ethical and political freedom. Despite the very clear limits of his analyses, *this* is Friedmann’s question, not simply to the traditions he discusses in Part III, but to anyone who claims to care about the material and spiritual wellbeing of the human species.

III.ii.b. From Spiritual Demands to Spiritual Exercises.

Friedmann does not actually discount anything—including the ancient philosophical practices and traditions that Hadot himself suggests—from potentially serving the forces of humanization in combatting the Great Disequilibrium. What Friedmann does discount, and quite clearly, is any “interior effort” that simply deploys traditional beliefs and practices without the work of properly tailoring them to the exigencies of the new milieu. He also discounts any form of spiritualism, as egoistic practices and efforts cannot by definition intersect with the fundamentally political, social, and collective nature of the spiritual demands in question—at

least, not for the better. Finally, he discounts any interior effort that is not substantively comprised of the spiritual-political efforts of average people, workers, the rank-and-file.

Regarding the first point however, with regard to Hadot's initial query, the answer is thus not to be found in any pre-existing regimen, individual practice, or tradition as it stands, because the contemporary spiritual demands of the Technological Adventure are just so radically new and unique. For Friedmann then, the answer may either be found in wholly new forms of spiritual exercise, in intentional "translation" of ancient spiritual exercises or familiar religious traditions, or in some complex of both. What matters is that any properly contemporary spiritual exercises are tailored to the diagnosis of the conditions at issue, and work toward a *telos* also determined by that diagnosis. For Friedmann, that means beginning with the Great Disequilibrium as it emerges from the Technological adventure, and ultimately arriving at a state of "humanization" capable of disrupting the cycle which perpetuates that imbalance.

Unfortunately, it is precisely here that we meet the limits of Friedmann's project. Where Hadot's oeuvre consists almost entirely in the analysis of specific spiritual exercises, we see almost nothing of the sort in Friedmann. And so, while he thoroughly models the kind of analysis necessary to determine what the spiritual exercises that he suggests we should take up "each day—either alone or in the company of another who also wishes to become better"¹⁷⁷ must look like, he also gives almost no examples of his own—with two, though only two, semi-exceptions. These are *La puissance et la sagesse*, taken as a whole, and a specific thread within the *Journal de guerre*, comprised of certain forms of reflection provoked for Friedmann by Molotov-Ribbentrop.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 259.

The first of these is the “interior voyage” at once constituted by and recorded in *La puissance et la sagesse*, a text the political, philosophical, sociological, ethical, and spiritual complexity of which I have most likely failed to do justice to here. This is in no small part because of its enormous length (442 pages, not including endnotes) and the wide range of themes and questions addressed there: from Friedmann’s childhood, to Stalinism, to the Kibbutz movement, and so on. Perhaps more importantly, *La puissance* is marked by a complex recursion: it is at once an analysis of contemporary spiritual demands, of the sort that is preliminarily required for the practice of spiritual exercises, *and* a spiritual exercise in its own right. It is as if, for Friedmann, the very analysis of the Great Disequilibrium can itself contribute to the humanization required to inaugurate new cycles outside of it.

In this way, the book is structurally parallel to the larger goals that he articulates. We must *first* become “new”—*in part, and as best we can*—through an interior effort, complimented by and intersecting with “exterior” political struggles, *within* the Great Disequilibrium. Only then can such “new human beings” act upon the built and natural environment in order to *begin* to disrupt the cycle of the Disequilibrium, a disruption which in turn provides the conditions of possibility for *newer* “new human beings,” who will in turn labor further on themselves directly, in order to further humanize the “new milieu.” It is a complex, ongoing, multi-step process, a cycle of humanization, rather than a singular “state” of humanization. Writing *La puissance* is thus for Friedmann, on my reading, a structurally or formally similar process. The analysis of the Great Disequilibrium is itself a form of interior effort, of the sort required to further transform oneself in the ways necessary to further address, mitigate, and contribute to the disruption of the cycle of Disequilibrium. Even as it is just one step in a process that does not, and indeed cannot, stop there.

The second, and much more easily recognizable, quasi-example of a concrete spiritual exercise in Friedmann's oeuvre is what calls the "examination" that he takes up within the *War Journals* to understand the devastating news of Molotov-Ribbentrop. Due to constraints of time however, it is impossible for me to do that examination justice, as the work of historically situating it is already a project in itself. Much more importantly however, I use the phrase "quasi-example" above because, in the end, even this examination ultimately seems to amount to another diagnostic exercise. Thus, despite some promise, any rehearsal or analysis of this thread would resemble the discussions that already constitute this chapter so closely as to serve no productive purpose in this overall project. It ultimately falls somewhat short of the full range of possibilities entailed by Friedmann's understanding of the interior effort as I have attempted to reconstruct it here.

IV. Conclusions.

We need not necessarily agree with Friedmann's entire assessment in *La puissance et la sagesse*, the *Journal de guerre*, *Industrial Society*, and elsewhere in order to see the enormous value of his work for the task of elaborating and understanding the larger category of ethical practices of self-transformation. Indeed, we are in no way necessarily obligated to adopt his view that the rapid acceleration of technological change is the foundation for the most pressing spiritual demands of his time, or our own for that matter. For my part, I am certainly sympathetic to the content of his claims regarding technological change and the specifics of both its possibilities and dangers, and I do believe that it holds great promise (as he himself did) for the current digital iteration of the technical milieu, and perhaps even its yet-unimaginable future forms. And although it remains somewhat incomplete, his ability to effectively describe the insufficiency of purely "exterior"

political models to at least certain conditions of distress and imbalance provides precisely the basis of the kind of formal framework that never quite appears in Hadot. The latter, as we have seen, never quite describes the relationship between material conditions and spiritual exercises, nor does he speculate much about the ways that they might reciprocally impact one another.

At the same time, as far as Friedmann's contributions go, it is certainly possible to imagine new analyses arriving at new and differing conclusions regarding the fundamental conditions that give rise to the precise spiritual demands of the contemporary world—or any time and place, for that matter. But any debate regarding the continued accuracy of Friedmann's specific claims is in fact tangential to my own purposes here. More importantly, his contributions are necessary to the broader understanding and elaboration of the idea of practices of the self that my own project seeks to accomplish in two fundamental ways: First, Friedmann provides a *formal model* by which we can understand the emergence of new forms of practice that are capable of meeting the spiritual demands of a given time, place, and people. Second, Friedmann's work demonstrates the possibility of the theorization of a *politics* of self-overcoming, in the exhaustive detail by which he attempts to “resituate” the relationship between material and ethical forces.

IV.i. Contributions: Friedmann's Analytic Model.

Contemporary Spiritual Exercises. First and foremost, Friedmann demonstrates both the possibility and necessity of historically and culturally appropriate (and thus, perhaps, efficacious) practices of the self; indeed, this is one of the ever-present positive subtexts to all of his work. But he does not simply demonstrate the criteria by which forms of spiritual exercise must be shaped and determined in his own time and place. Certainly, he *specifically* delimits the

precise contours of the Technological Adventure of Human Beings in the 20th Century and the Great Disequilibrium. But in so doing, he also provides a necessary *formal model* for the kinds of research, observation, and insight that would be required to properly address the spiritual demands of *any* time and place. In other words, Friedmann gives us the most robust example, of any of the thinkers addressed in this project, of the kind of analysis of intersecting spiritual and material conditions required in order to specify the precise forms that any “interior effort” or regimen of spiritual exercises must take in order to address those demands.

This is, on my reading, Friedmann’s most important contribution: He models an effective and exhaustive method for going about answering the fundamental question of how to conceive of—and indeed to practice—spiritual exercises not only in the present, but at all. As we have seen, this necessity is entailed by Hadot’s analyses, even as Hadot does not in turn model the kinds of investigations required to specify the precise nature of given spiritual demands, and therefore forms that the interior effort would need to take. Recall, that it is just here that we run up against the limits of Hadot’s equally exhaustive project. Indeed, the ways in which the two ultimately abut and complement each other are thus clearest at precisely this juncture.

A Political Interiority. Second, Friedmann accomplishes this in a way that demonstrates the beginnings of a much-needed bulwark against charges of ethical spiritualism and political moralism, and thus begins to answer a series of important questions implicitly raised in my discussion of Hadot in Chapter 1. Specifically, his descriptions of the cyclical nature of the Great Disequilibrium—and the cyclical nature of any potentially successful effort to address it—demonstrate an intimate understanding of the ethical and material statuses of human beings in which neither is, properly speaking, given priority over the other. Moreover, Friedmann never once abandons the view that the transformation of material conditions is fundamental to human

flourishing, nor does he in any way reject the idea that technological change, properly controlled, is integral to our humanization. At the same time, our humanization, through spiritual exercises and an interior effort that marshals moral forces capable of transforming laboring subjects, is itself the very foundation of our ability to become “superior to our works.” In other words: our humanization is the condition of our further humanization, and the transformation of the technological milieu is the condition of its further transformation, precisely because the “interior” and “exterior” efforts are the reciprocating conditions of one another.

Implicit in this formulation, and made explicit in one unfortunately insufficient and brief passage on Hindu spirituality in contemporary India, is a critique of any over-reliance or over-emphasis on religious or philosophical specialists. As he says in the section titled “Human Beings Superior to Our Works” in Part IV, near the closing pages of *La puissance*:

Hence the necessity of a quotidian combat, of an “everyday courage”—according to the fine title of the Czech film¹⁷⁸—for those great and most often small actions which require mastery of oneself, lucidity, and disinterestedness. This is the New Frontier, which is multiple, quotidian, prosaic, and glorious, in which men and women must struggle, from their adolescence: struggling both with ourselves and with our technological objects. This is the boundless field open to human effort. It is the challenge launched toward human beings, to show ourselves, by ourselves, superior to our works.”¹⁷⁹

This interior effort must, on Friedmann’s account, be both everyday and not the exclusive purview of the contemporary sage. While it is never explicitly spelled out, this view also implicitly entails that the practices and efforts taken up by average people would have to be different in some fundamental ways than those of specialists. This is in part due to the differences in time and resources for such practice available to different people. Much more importantly however, because of the unique physical, economic, and material conditions within

¹⁷⁸ Evald Schorm, “Každý den odvahu (Courage for Every Day),” (Czechoslovakia 1964).

¹⁷⁹ Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 409.

which average people engage in spiritual exercises, as Friedmann does indeed specify in great detail throughout *La puissance* and elsewhere.

Friedmann thus demonstrates both the kind of work required to understand given spiritual demands and thereby specify appropriate spiritual exercises, and provides a picture of a politics of self-overcoming that does not amount to egoism or spiritualism. He also hints at the importance of a genuine democratization of spiritual exercises, as a necessary consequence of any attempt to “re-situate” the ethical and political and to collectively “re-source” ourselves. And yet, while these contributions are indeed indispensable for any truly robust understanding of the category of ethical practices of self-overcoming, we do ultimately encounter the limits of Friedmann’s thought (as we have with Hadot, and as we ultimately must with Foucault and King). Where Hadot showed us both what spiritual exercises look like *and* the necessity of kind of diagnostic research Friedmann provides, his projects ends in some sense just where Friedmann’s begins. Similarly, we have already encountered several important limitations and omissions in Friedmann—important precisely because they are, on my reading, in fact necessarily entailed by the historical and philosophical substance of his work.

IV.ii. Limitations and Implications.

The Meaning of “New.” Among Friedmann’s further contributions is his demonstration that when speaking of new practices, “new” can mean many things, including new versions of old technologies and forms of life, updated and translated for new purposes. And yet, Friedmann still fails to provide further examples that would meet the criteria he specifies. He does not show us what concrete examples of properly contemporary, collective, and fundamentally political practices of the self or regimes of interior effort would look like. At very least, however, he is in

good company here: Hadot, as we have seen, does not provide such examples either, and Foucault seems to struggle with the same problem as well. We will *only* see such genuine and detailed historical examples when we finally engage the concept of “self-purification” in the life and work of Martin Luther King Jr. in Chapter 4.

The Limits of the Environmental Picture. There is a more subtle series of questions and ambiguities that arise from Friedmann’s work, specifically regarding his admirable and fascinating formulation of the ways in which ethics and politics intersect through labor and the built environment. We may thus ask of Friedmann if is it *only* through this reciprocating engagement with the milieu (as he defines it) that we may see a genuine (non-spiritualist, non-reductionist) politics of self-overcoming at work? While the admittedly impressionistic picture that Friedmann paints here is fascinating and holds exciting implications for this project, is there not something limited and limiting about it? Can the relationship of the ethical status of subjects and the political, material conditions of power be further analyzed—and further generalized? Is it primarily through such forms of labor that our “moral forces” gain political efficacy?

Though his insights on these questions are far more detailed than, for example, the limited analyses on the question of mass- and everyday- forms of the “interior effort,” his work in this area also leaves many gaps, and remains undertheorized. Indeed, it is a thread that does not take a central analytic position within his researches, but rather appears as needed, in the form of a kind of explanatory support structure. In other words, it is never taken up for itself, neither philosophically, sociologically, nor historically.

The theme of the reciprocating relationship between work on the world and work on oneself, while powerful, thus raises two problems. The first of these is internal to the concept: it is never explicitly, and thus never fully, fleshed out for itself; it remains a philosophically

unsatisfying picture. The second is more relevant for my own purposes, while being a consequence of the former: Is the formulation of a non-reductive understanding of the relationship between material and structural political conditions and the ethical status and “moral forces” of individuals limited to the specific picture that Friedmann paints regarding our relationship to labor and the built environment? My answer is, perhaps obviously, no. And just as the answer to the question of further understanding and specifying contemporary practices will be taken up in Chapter 4 on Martin Luther King, the answer to this question will be found in Chapter 3, with the help of Michel Foucault.

Chapter 3: Michel Foucault, From the Analytics of Power to the Care of the Self Or “On the Politics of Ethics”

I. Introduction

In the first hour of the 17 February lecture of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, his 1981-1982 lecture course at the Collège de France, Michel Foucault makes the claim, almost in passing, that “there is no first or final point of resistance to political power than in the relationship that one has to oneself.”¹ This brief statement arguably constitutes the most succinct and direct articulation on his part that Foucault’s central concern with the relationship of the self to itself, a concern which serves as the guiding thread through his final lectures and publications, and indeed his very notion of ethics, is “first and finally” a political one.

Foucault continues, elaborating in a way that could almost be read as an implicit overview of his work in the years beginning with the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, and leading up to the *Hermeneutics* and beyond. “In other words,” he says, “what I mean is this:”

If we take the question of power, of political power, situating it in the more general question of governmentality understood as a strategic field of power relations in the broadest and not merely political sense of the term, if we understand by governmentality a strategic field of power relations in their mobility, transformability, and reversibility, then I do not think that reflection on this notion of governmentality can avoid passing through, theoretically and practically, the element of a subject defined by the relationship of self to self. Although the theory of political power as an institution usually refers to a juridical conception of the subject of right, it seems to me that the analysis of governmentality—that is to say, of power as a set of reversible relationships—must refer to an ethics defined by the relationship of self to self.²

By Foucault’s own lights however, the analysis of governmentality cannot merely “refer” to ethics as he construes it. It is further and “quite simply” that “in the type of analysis that I have been trying to advance for some time, you can see that power relations, governmentality, the government of the self and of others, and the relationship of self to self constitute a chain, a

¹ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, 252.

² Ibid.

thread.”³ It is thus “around these notions that we should be able to connect together the question of politics and the question of ethics.”⁴

And yet, even within the context of the *Hermeneutics* and the lecture in question, these statements can appear somewhat inscrutable, for reasons both close and distant from these lectures, and from Foucault’s project itself. If it is Foucault’s concern to “connect together the question of politics and the question of ethics,” and if it is the case that “there is no first or last point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself,” it is not at all clear, at least not from this brief aside, what the form, content, and consequences of that relationship really are. Moreover, this passage in the *Hermeneutics* is one of the few places in his oeuvre that Foucault explicitly identifies the goal of describing the link between the political and the ethical within his analyses. That work is otherwise implicit within the lectures and later publications—even as it constitutes one of the primary guiding threads of Foucault’s late “ethical” period—where the exact nature of the relationship between ethics and politics is rarely, if ever, articulated.

This is not to say that this claim simply appears without context, far from it. Foucault’s point sits firmly within a deeper, though brief, discussion of “the possible historical importance of this prescriptive figure of the return to the self.”⁵ He notes first that this idea of a “return to the self” may not be the proper framework within which to understand the kinds of early Christian practices which he had just begun discussing in the February 17th lecture, in contrast and in tandem with the ancient, pre-Christian, philosophical context. More importantly, and more

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 250.

immediately however, Foucault points out that there is indeed something “modern” about this thread:

I think we should also note that the theme of return to the self has undoubtedly been a recurrent theme in ‘modern’ culture since the sixteenth century. However, I also think that we cannot fail to be struck by the fact that this theme of return to the self has basically been reconstituted—but in fragments and scraps—in a series of successive attempts that have never been organized in the overall and continuous way that it was in Hellenistic and Roman antiquity. The theme of return to the self has never been dominant for us as it was possible for it to be in the Hellenistic and Roman epoch.⁶

He continues, describing that reconstitution and its implications, albeit again briefly: “To be sure, there is an ethics and also an aesthetics of the self in the sixteenth century, which refers explicitly, moreover, to what is found in the Greek and Latin authors I am talking about.”⁷

Similarly, he notes, “We could also take up the history of nineteenth century thought a bit in this perspective:”

Here, no doubt, things would be much more complicated, ambiguous, and contradictory. However, a whole section of nineteenth-century thought can be reread as a difficult attempt, a series of difficult attempts, to reconstitute an ethics and an aesthetics of the self. If you take, for example, Stirner, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, dandyism, Baudelaire, anarchy, anarchist thought, etcetera, then you have a series of attempts that are, of course, very different from each other, but which are all more or less obsessed by the question: is it possible to constitute, or reconstitute, an aesthetics of the self? At what cost and under what conditions?⁸

Foucault does not however, at least not here, provide much in the way of analysis regarding of this long list of varied figures and movements: neither in their ability to “reconstitute an ethics and an aesthetics of the self,” nor in their ability to offer us something in that direction today.

What he does note, however, is that these efforts have by no means disappeared. And while he does not pass judgement, or least not too much judgement, on the 16th - 19th century

⁶ Ibid., 251. (And there is perhaps nothing more modern, after all, than a fragmentary reconstitution of Greco-Roman antiquity.)

⁷ Here Foucault gives the example of Montaigne, who, he argues “should be reread in this perspective, as an attempt to reconstitute an aesthetics and an ethics of the self.” (ibid.)

⁸ Ibid. Note that Foucault’s examples here, whether 16th or 19th century, are not random. And while the specific ways in which each of them fit into the framework that he is suggesting is tangential to my questions here, his reasoning, and thus their appropriateness, should be clearer on the other side of these analyses.

iterations of the ethics and aesthetics of the self, Foucault does have some rare words for the 20th century forms current at the time of the lectures:

what I would like to point out is that, after all, when today we see the meaning, or rather the almost total absence of meaning, given to some nonetheless very familiar expressions which continue to permeate our discourse—like getting back to oneself, freeing oneself, being oneself, being authentic, etcetera—when we see the absence of meaning and thought in all of these expressions we employ today, then I do not think we have anything to be proud of in our current efforts to reconstitute an ethic of the self.⁹

Foucault’s comments here are as amusing as they are damning, though they are not without philosophical content, and do not amount to a mere dismissal. Indeed, Foucault seems to take the challenge posed by such conceptions to his own work quite seriously: both as an easy and seductive misreading of his project, and as a kind of negative standard against which his ethics must be thoroughly tailored and re-tailored to avoid.

As I have already discussed in the Introduction above, it is at the very outset of the *Hermeneutics*, Foucault makes perhaps the only other explicit statement in the lectures regarding those negative criteria. But such critiques are not limited to the *Hermeneutics*. In the 1983 interview “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” Dreyfus and Rabinow ask Foucault whether or not “the Greek concern with the self [isn’t] just an early version of self-absorption, which many consider a central problem in our society?”¹⁰ In his response, Foucault offers a little more detail regarding the problems he sees in those forms of expression which “continue to permeate our discourse:”

You have a certain number of themes—and I don’t say that you have to reutilize them in this way—which indicate to you that in a culture to which we owe a certain number of our most important constant moral elements, there was a practice of the self, a conception of the self, very different from our present culture of the self. In the Californian cult of the self, one is supposed to discover one’s true self, to separate it from that which might obscure or alienate it, to decipher its truth thanks to psychological or psychoanalytic science, which is supposed to be able to tell you what your true self is. Therefore, not only do I not identify this ancient culture of the self with what you might call the Californian cult of the self, I think they are diametrically opposed.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Foucault, “On The Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of a Work in Progress,” 271.

What happens in between is precisely an overturning of the classical culture of the self. This took place when Christianity substituted the idea of a self that one had to renounce, because clinging to the self was opposed to God's will, for the idea of a self that had to be created as a work of art.¹¹

This “Californian cult of the self” is thus one iteration of the form of the relationship to oneself that, according to Foucault, we have been encouraged to cultivate for some time. And it is representative, though by no means exhaustive, of the practical intersection those forms of ethical egoism (or spiritualism) and political withdrawal (or moralism) of which there is little for us to be proud.

The question of course, is just why: what exactly is being rejected here, and what, conversely, is being endorsed? The first and most basic problem with the associations that tend to attach to the vocabulary that Foucault invokes here, is that they again take “us away from thinking about these precepts in positive terms.”¹² And this problem extends beyond the analytic task as well, as they tend to block, distract from, and otherwise occupy the space that could, and indeed *should*, be devoted to the articulation of a proper aesthetics of existence (whatever that may mean for Foucault). But these “meaningless” efforts are troubling for Foucault far beyond a mere lack of content, or indeed the uncomfortable affective and aesthetic trappings that so often attach to them, as noted in the Introduction.

In other words, the condemnation of the “Californian cult of the self” is neither a simple disclaimer nor a dismissal founded on superficial aesthetic grounds. It is instead a substantive philosophical criticism of a certain form that one's relationship to oneself can take. And if the “cult of the self” is an especially ethically and politically pernicious historical iteration of that relationship, it is in part because it is *formally* representative of the kinds of self-constitution that

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, 12.

Foucault must necessarily reject. It is thus a question of extracting and specifying those underlying criteria, and in turn reconstructing Foucault's positive vision here.

But here we must tread carefully. There are many of kinds of egoism, and many forms of withdrawal to be sure, and given forms of practice may evince these features in equally diverse ways. But there are also many practices that may appear to manifest either, and yet ultimately do not. Indeed many of the practices of the self that Foucault will analyze (and at times seem to endorse) could very well be understood in terms of a withdrawal from political life, at least on a surface reading. For this reason, we cannot simply acknowledge the distinction between the cosmetics of a practice and its pragmatic substance and move on; it is instead a guideline and a standard that must be rigorously maintained at every stage of investigation. And it is for this reason that the danger that given trappings may distort an analysis remains a live one and a genuine concern, both for us and for Foucault.

Further still however, there is an even deeper and perhaps more relevant implication to all of this. Even seemingly clear terms like "egoism" and "withdrawal" only begin to reveal the depth and nature of the ultimate critique and the accompanying positive formulation. Neither the terms themselves nor their brief references in the *Hermeneutics* actually tell us much—at least not yet—about the way that the very charges of egoism and withdrawal function negatively for Foucault. Nor do they yet help us understand the positive counterparts which structure his analyses of the relationship of the self to itself. In other words, there is yet another and much more substantive possibility for confusion here, because we do not yet know what either egoism or withdrawal actually mean for Foucault. And because these are after all such common terms, it is possible for even a careful reader to simply assign them a general meaning and move on. We

must take yet another step back in order to so much as understand what “egoism” is, or what actual withdrawal from political life might look like.

The question is thus and again one of determining the philosophical and political framework and criteria which undergird Foucault’s analyses of the care of the self in particular, and the relationship of the self to itself more broadly. And as I will argue here, both his critique—down to the very specification of the terms and objects of that critique—and its positive inverse are determined by the specific nature of the “chain” of governmentality that he invokes in the *Hermeneutics*. In other words, in order to understand the formal relationship of the self to itself that Foucault deems politically indispensable, we must understand the precise way in which he “connects together” the question of politics and the question of ethics. More precisely, I demonstrate here that this connection ultimately consists in a positive revaluation of the relationship of ethics to politics which operates with increasing specificity—if only at times implicitly—within Foucault’s late work. That revaluation in fact emerges as a direct logical consequence of the positive analytics of power that initially appears in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*. And finally, as a kind of byproduct, this revaluation also entails a kind of negation, *en passant*, of any view which reads Foucault’s “ethical” period in terms of a “break” with the more explicit—or rather, more familiar—political concerns of the mid-1970s.

However, this reading is indeed more complex than a simple refutation, as the exegetical question is also a philosophical one. This is because the tensions and ambiguities surrounding the precise nature of the ethical project have been the source of no small amount of misunderstanding in the history of reading Foucault. In fact, Foucault’s ethics, specifically the political consequences of his ethics, will either appear incoherent *or* seem to evince a form of precisely that egoistic withdrawal he himself explicitly criticizes, *if* it is not understood from the

perspective of the more fundamental reevaluation in question. In other words, Foucault's ethics rest upon a reformulation of the relationship of ethics to politics, and any reading that attempts to excavate the political consequences of his ethics that does not explicitly begin from that framework will radically misrepresent both the ethics *and* the analytics of power which preceded it. Foucault's ethics will thus appear as precisely the form of egoism, indeed of spiritualism, from which he, like Friedmann and Hadot before him, takes pains to distance himself in the first place.

It is not, therefore, a danger of mere misinterpretation, but a genuine philosophical threat to the coherence of his later work as a whole, one that Foucault himself takes quite seriously (even if that gravity is evinced in a characteristically implicit way). In order to hold the view that Foucault somehow abandoned politics¹³ *or* that he somehow adopted a kind of political "moralism" as Friedmann defines it, one must conceptualize the relationship of ethics to politics in precisely the way that Foucault fundamentally rejects. That rejection, further, is a necessary consequence of his very conception of power, as first articulated in volume one of the *History of Sexuality*, and developed through both the "ethical" writings and the elaboration of governmentality as a concept and methodological framework.

While Foucault would not use this language himself, I argue here that the connection between ethics and politics is for him "dialectical" rather than "causal" in form. By this I mean that ethical life (including even moral codes) is not a causal effect of political conditions—understood in economic, material, systemic, and collective terms. Conversely, politics cannot be conceived as the consequence of ethical behavior in aggregate. As Friedmann has already helped

¹³ Indeed, the three primary mis-readings of Foucault's ethics are all the arguable result of precisely this misunderstanding: Views that see a "break" from politics to ethics; views that read strange accounts of neoliberalism into Foucault's later work; or more simply, views that would read forms of ethical reductionism, spiritualism, or Friedmann's moralism, into Foucault.

us see, both of these formulations are merely the extremes of a shared economy of power, one that operates through a misplaced “causal” logic. To put it in Friedmann’s terms, Foucault is neither a moralist, nor does he trade in a *Marxisme naïf*.

It is for this reason that I see a deep parallel between Friedmann’s comments at the outset of *La puissance*, and Foucault’s passing lament in the *Hermeneutics*—and therefore in their respective projects. Both the moralist and the naïve revolutionary misconstrue something in the way that they both identify and privilege a given category of conduct. Further still, this parallel between Friedmann and Foucault goes beyond the theoretical and diagnostic, and extends itself even into the realm of the practical and prescriptive. Indeed, when Frederic Gros describes the fundamental imbrication of *aletheia*, *politeia* and *ethos*, in the “Course Context” of Foucault’s *Courage of Truth* lectures, characterized as they are by “two principles of necessary correlation and definitive irreducibility,”¹⁴ he could very well have been speaking of Friedmann’s own desire to “resituate” the relationship between the moral and the material.

However, where Friedmann so well provided a sociological and historical demonstration of the necessity to re-situate and thus reevaluate the moral and the political, he did not, after all, provide much in the way of theoretical detail. We know, for example, that the relationship to the environment, whether “natural” or “built,” constitutes the subjects who labor upon it, which again and in turn impacts that labor, and thus the environment. But Friedmann’s primary contribution has been to demonstrate that unique historical factors—technological change perhaps above all—have created a disequilibrium within that dialectic. That disequilibrium results in historically unique ethical-political “spiritual demands.” This moral and material crisis that has brought about forms of suffering and injustice that are not to be understood as something

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“worse” than previous conditions, but rather something *unique*, with both causes and potential solutions which must be determined with the resources of the present—and *not* by a nostalgic retreat into the past.

But in his philosophical, sociological, *and* personal writings, Friedmann does not provide the kind of theoretical elaboration necessary to either understand how all of this is meant to “work.” Nor can we find in those pages any really substantive articulation of precisely the reformulation of the relationship of ethics to politics with which he opens *La puissance*. Foucault, on the other hand, through the very coherence of the analytics of power and the ethics of the care of the self, provides that necessary foundation, in the fine-grained detail necessary to fully theorize both that need, this revaluation, and their consequences.

Moreover, it is Foucault who allows us to fill in the conceptual gaps left in questions at once raised by Hadot and hinted at by Friedmann. If we speak of a “care of the self,” what must a “care of the other” look like? How can we conceive—if at all—in a form of the care of the self which is *at once* the care of the other—or vice versa? How would it be possible to attend to oneself in a way that is not ultimately a form of egoism, but is in fact a way of attending to others *through* practices of self-constitution? How can one care for a community, or intervene on the broader systemic level, *by* caring for oneself—and is such a thing even possible? Conversely, neither Foucault nor Friedmann deny an unbreakable relationship between the relationship that one has to oneself and the material, economic, and political conditions within which that relationship is embedded, and by which it is ultimately shaped. How then can political action be understood as ethical action? How can the relationship to the other, and to many others collectively, be construed in terms of the relationship that one has to oneself? How, in other

words, can we understand the relationship between changing selves and changing material conditions?

It is Foucault, uniquely among the authors I engage here, who provides the resources required to answer these questions, even as others will be raised in the process. And by refracting this entire range of questions through the lens of Foucault's mid-to-late oeuvre, it is possible to pose the overall problem in concise yet deceptively simple terms: What are the politics of Foucault's ethics?

II. From the Analytics of Power to Counter-Conduct

It is well known that Foucault's *History of Sexuality* was originally planned as a six-volume historical-philosophical study, with the first, *La volonté du savoir*, meant as the theoretical introduction to the project as a whole. While Foucault abandoned that larger series for various reasons, the first volume was indeed completed and published as intended in 1976. The second and third volumes would ultimately appear just before Foucault's death in 1984, though they were in substance a radical departure from the initial plan as announced a decade prior—to the confusion and consternation of many readers. Similarly, the recently published manuscript of the fourth volume, which retains its original title, *The Confessions of the Flesh*, raises as many new questions as it seems to answer.

However, it is possible to overlook the fact that while the volumes that would follow differed in their substance from Foucault's original purpose, the *Introduction*—as it is called in English—did not. Neither in its articulation of the positive analytics of power and the rejection of juridical-repressive conceptions in general, *nor* in the role that the analytics of power would play in understanding the research that would follow. In fact, the role of the first volume remains

consistent with Foucault's original plan, and we must not confuse a shift in his later historical and philosophical interests for a comparable abandonment of the theoretical foundations he lays out in *La volonté*. It is for this reason that, in a way that can be easily overlooked, despite any changes to the later volumes, *La volonté du savoir* yet remains the theoretical (and indeed methodological) introduction to the volumes and texts that would follow—including the Foucault's lectures, interviews, and short pieces. Its role, in other words, must be understood in exactly the way that Foucault initially specified: despite whatever differences may have emerged in the years following its publication with regard to the other texts, they cannot be read *but* against *La volonté* as a theoretical backdrop.

Put simply, there is no indication that Foucault at all abandoned those philosophical commitments in the way that he departed from given historical studies. To the contrary, it is rather clear that the theoretical commitments described so concisely in *La volonté* would consequently, and indeed necessarily, motivate and guide those new areas of investigation. Thus, while it is obvious that a book like *Discipline and Punish* must be understood to progress in part by the logic articulated in *La volonté*, this goes equally for texts as seemingly different as Foucault's lectures on neoliberalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, the writings on governmentality, truth, and so on. It also means that Foucault's "ethical" writings, in both the late lectures and the second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, must also be understood in terms of the analytics of power as articulated in *La volonté*.

In fact, I argue here that Foucault's ethics of the care of the self, the aesthetics of existence, and indeed the very concern with the self's relationship to itself, are a logical and methodological consequence of Foucault's analytics of power, and are presaged in *La volonté*. More precisely, any attempt to understand these concepts and the texts in which they are

elaborated outside of that conception of power relations will ultimately fail, resulting in distorted views of power, the subject, ethics, and so on—views that resemble *precisely* those conceptions that Foucault sets out to critique and overturn. This includes, as I have already indicated, those forms of ethical egoism, evinced historically in cases such as the Californian Cult of the Self, with which we began. Thus, even as Foucault’s historical focus shifts, and even as he again and again re-articulates his project in terms of its central philosophical object (from power, to the subject, to truth, etc.), he does not abandon the principle, first articulated in *La volonté* of relations of power as constitutively positive and creative, rather than juridical or “repressive.”

Thus, we cannot understand Foucault’s ethics—and we certainly cannot understand the *politics* of Foucault’s ethics—without understanding relations of power. And there are at least two central consequences of the analytics of power modeled and articulated in *La volonté* that are necessary to any reading of the ethics of the care of the self: First, the way in which Foucault’s understanding of power entails a certain conception of freedom, (and its own attending consequences); Second, the explicit rejection of an ahistorical or transcendental subject.

II.i. The Head of the King

At the opening of the brief text “The Subject and Power,” a text which in many ways summarizes the conclusions of *La volonté de savoir*, Foucault explains that it is his concern with “the different modes by which human beings are made subjects” that has led him to pay such close and careful attention to relations of power.¹⁵ As he says, “it is not power, but the subject,

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, *Essential works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984* (New York: New Press, 2000), 326.

that is the general theme of my research,”¹⁶ and the analytics of power emerges from certain methodological exigencies generated by this line of inquiry. For Foucault, if one wishes to understand the subject and the ways in which various forms of human subjectivity are constituted, their features and effects, one must look to the differing relationships of power within which we are implicated and necessarily participate.

In “The Subject and Power,” Foucault is quite explicit that “what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions.”¹⁷ Power, in other words,

“operates on the field of possibilities in which the behavior of active subjects is able to inscribe itself. It is a set of actions on possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, makes more probable or less; in the extreme, it constrains or forbids absolutely, but it is always a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of actions. A set of actions upon other actions.”¹⁸

For Foucault, power is understood as “a ‘conduct of conducts’ and a management of possibilities”¹⁹ not because it can corral the “will” or “instincts” of an otherwise autonomous subject. Rather, relations of power operate as action on the possible actions of given subjects, because they are constitutive of subjects themselves. As he puts it in one of the opening lectures of *Society Must be Defended*,

The question is this: what happens at the moment of, at the level of the procedure of subjugation, or in the continuous and uninterrupted processes that subjugate bodies, direct gestures, and regulate forms of behavior? In other words, rather than asking ourselves what the subject looks like from on high, we should

¹⁶ Ibid., 327.

¹⁷ Ibid., 340.

¹⁸ Ibid., 341.

¹⁹ Ibid.

be trying to discover how multiple bodies, forces, energies, matters, desires, thoughts and so on are gradually, progressively, actually and materially constituted as subjects, or as the subject.²⁰

It is in this way that through various institutional and practical forms, that in shaping *who one is*, relations of power influence and control *what they may do*.

With regard to the legal and punitive context explored in a text like *Discipline and Punish*, for example, “mechanisms of legal punishment” take a hold “not only [of] offences, but [of] individuals; not only [of] what they do, but also what they are, will be, may be.”²¹

Punishment, like surveillance, confession and so much else, “acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations,” what Foucault there calls the “soul.”²² In this way we see that the very stakes of the give and take of relations of power are nothing less than what Foucault famously calls “men’s subjection: their constitution as subjects in both senses of the word,”²³ and the ability to exert influence over processes of subjection in given cases. Or, as he puts it in “The Subject and Power,”

[Power] categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word ‘subject:’ subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to.²⁴

Thus the subject—and the ability to exert influence over its constitution—can be understood as being both what is at stake and the very site within which and over which relations of power engage in struggle. Thus the goal for Foucault is “To grasp the material agency of

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76* (New York: Picador, 2003), 28.

²¹ *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 18.

²² *Ibid.*, 16.

²³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 60.

²⁴ “The Subject and Power,” 331.

subjugation insofar as it constitutes subjects.”²⁵ Moreover, on this understanding the two senses of “subjection” are in fact far more closely bound than they might seem: it is precisely *by* managing the very constitution of subjects—people, individuals—*that* human beings are *subjected* in the political sense.

II.ii. Relations of Resistance

Now, if “one of the first effects of power is that it allows bodies, gestures, discourses, and desires to be identified and constituted as something individual”²⁶ and “[if] the individual is in fact a power-effect,” then “at the same time, and to the extent that he is a power-effect, the individual is a relay: power passes through individuals that it has constituted.”²⁷ Whether through confessional acts, practices of incarceration, or whatever other historical forms he takes up, it is perhaps Foucault’s fundamental observation that we must begin to understand power not as a singular and totalizing force, but rather as a relationship, or indeed a series of relations:

It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect.²⁸

Or, in other words:

The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. And ‘Power,’ insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of

²⁵ *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, 28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁸ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, 93.

them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement...[Power] is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.²⁹

And it is for this reason that, as he puts it in “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom:” “This brings us back to the problem of what I mean by power. I scarcely use the word *power*, and if I use it on occasion it is simply as shorthand for the expression I generally use: *relations of power*.”³⁰ Power is thus both productive and relational; it is not merely constitutive of subjects, but necessarily co-constitutive.

It is for precisely this reason that where there are relations of power, one also *necessarily* finds relations of resistance:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always ‘inside’ power, there is no ‘escaping’ it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned, because one is subject to the law in any case? Or that, history being the ruse of reason, power is the ruse of history, always emerging the winner? This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships.³¹

Resistance, as understood here, is not something that is either ancillary or external to power. Rather it is as a consequence of the Foucauldian understanding of power itself; resistance is immanent in power—and by extension, power is immanent in resistance. It is for this reason

²⁹ Ibid. And it is precisely for this reason that Foucault speaks of an “analytics,” rather than a “theory” of power relations.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, *Essential works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984* (New York, NY: The New Press, 1997), 282-83.)

³¹ *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, 95. Here it is helpful to note that Foucault’s use of the term power can be read as a kind of metaphorical importation of a certain understanding from the physical sciences into the province of human subjectivity and action. A brief gloss of the OED gives the following definition of power in the context of physics and mechanics: “15. a. Any form or source of energy or force available for application to work, or applied to produce motion, heat, or pressure; *spec. (a)* mechanical force applied to overcome a resisting force such as weight or friction.” (power, n.1,” *The Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, September 2011), <http://www.oed.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/149167>.) This notion of “resisting force,” of friction or gravity, translated into the domain of human life is integral to the Foucauldian understanding of relations of power.

that power is above understood as *struggle*, between unequal forces to be sure, but between mutually-resisting forces nonetheless.

Points of resistance are “present everywhere in the power network...[and] by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. But this does not mean that they are only a reaction or rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat.”³² Rather, it is the multiple, mobile and above all *strategic* element that lends to resistance the possibility of efficacy:

[Most often] one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds. Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized within them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities. And it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible, somewhat similar to the way in which the state relies on the institutional integration of power relationships.³³

Put differently, “power” and “resistance” are not exactly conflicting terms; rather, a *relation of power* is a situation in which different resisting forces engage and exert tactical or strategic influence—however unequal—over one another.

This insistence on power and resistance as the varying poles of a relationship is the reason that Foucault can then say that “When one defines the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others, when one characterizes these actions as the government of men by other men—in the broadest sense of the term—one includes an important element: freedom.”³⁴ He further insists that,

³² Ibid., 96.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 342.

Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are ‘free.’ By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behavior are available. Where the determining factors are exhaustive, there is no relationship of power. [...] In this game, freedom may well appear as the condition for the exercise of power (at the same time its precondition, for freedom must exist for power to be exerted, and also its permanent support, since without the possibility of recalcitrance power would be equivalent to a physical determination).³⁵

And so, if we understand resistance to be the deployment of force by one of these poles, we can also understand it to be synonymous with freedom—indeed, *from a certain point of view* we can understand “power” itself to be synonymous with both terms.

In this way, it is not simply that “power is exercised only *over* free subjects,” but only *by* free subjects as well. “Freedom” is the capacity to exert resistance, but that capacity is the necessary precondition for being engaged in relations of power in the first place. As Foucault further explains,

The power relationship and freedom’s refusal to submit cannot therefore be separated...At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential antagonism, it would be better to speak of an ‘agonism’—of a relationship that is at the same time mutual incitement and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation that paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation.³⁶

Without this push-and-pull or give-and-take, without the fact of the resistance of one force to another, *by definition* we do not have a relation of power, but rather something else entirely, which does not and cannot produce the sorts of effects that power does. Foucault has referred to such instances as “states of domination,” a relationship of power so extreme that it

³⁵ Ibid. Or, as Foucault puts it elsewhere, “It should be noted that power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free. If one of them were completely at the other’s disposal and became his thing, an object on which he could wreak boundless and limitless violence, there wouldn’t be any relations of power...This means that in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all.” (Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 291.)

³⁶ “The Subject and Power,” 342.

can no longer be designated as either power, or even a “relation” at all.³⁷ What matters here however is that relations of power, in which the constitution of the subject is both the site and the stake, entail the possibility of acts of resistance on precisely those same terms. The question now becomes one of just which historical forms resistance can and must take.

II.iii. On Counter-conduct

It is noteworthy that Foucault consistently uses the language of games and play in describing power relations, in part to highlight the fact that in a relation of power, a force is deployed to certain ends (conducting subjects in given ways), and takes on forms tailored to those ends. But as should be clear, the strategic fact necessarily cuts both ways: if the power that one meets takes on a certain form, the resistance with which one responds must take that form into account. In the corpus of Foucault’s published materials, it is with the twinned notions of pastoral power and counter-conduct, as discussed in the lecture of 1 March 1978 in *Security, Territory, Population*, that we find the best articulated theoretical treatment of the strategic and agentive play of resistance that Foucault explicitly provides.

³⁷ We may call that a state of domination perhaps, but it is again anything but a relation of power in the strict sense. Unfortunately, there is neither time nor call to engage the even more complex question of the relationship between “states of domination” and relations of power just here. Suffice it to say for now Foucault is ready to admit that the former can and indeed do exist: “slavery is not a power relationship when a man is in chains, only when he has some possible mobility, even a chance of escape.” (Ibid.) However, it should be noted that this example must be taken metaphorically, as a way of attempting to imagine what a state of total domination of one subject over another might look like. Historically, slavery is not the best example, as Foucault himself has shown us precisely in analyzing the multiple forms that relations of power may take, the forms that resistance may take are just as varied and unpredictable. Foucault is slightly more abstract, and thus clearer, on this point in “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” when he characterizes domination as something like the absolute impossibility of any further management of conduct: “When an individual or social group succeeds in blocking a field of power relations, immobilizing them and preventing any reversibility of movement by economic, political, or military means, one is faced with what may be called a state of domination. In such a state, it is certain that practices of freedom do not exist or exist only unilaterally or are extremely constrained and limited.” (“The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 283.)

In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault defines the idea of “conduct” as “the activity of conducting (*conduire*), of conduction (*la conduction*)...but it is equally the way in which one conducts oneself (*se conduire*), lets oneself be conducted (*se laisse conduire*), is conducted (*est conduit*), and finally, in which one behaves (*se comporter*) as an effect of a form of conduct (*un conduit*) as the action of conducting or conduction.”³⁸ The power to conduct the conduct of others “takes as its instrument the methods that allow one to direct them (*les conduire*), and as its target the way in which they conduct themselves, the way in which they behave.”³⁹ If this management or “government”⁴⁰ of others by a “pastorate” of some kind is what is called conduct, there are also those “equally specific movements of resistance and insubordination” which appear precisely “in correlation” with systems of conduct.⁴¹ These are, as he says, “movements whose objective is a different form of conduct, that is to say: wanting to be conducted differently, by other leaders (*conducteurs*) and other shepherds, toward other objectives and forms of salvation, and through other procedures and methods. They are movements that also seek, possibly at any rate, to escape direction by others and to define the way for each to conduct himself.”⁴² Or, as he puts it a few pages later, counter-conduct occurs “always with an aspect of another form of conduct: to be led differently, by other men, and

³⁸ *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 193.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴⁰ Recall that “governmentality” is *not* an inherently political term (or rather, calls into question just what we mean when we talk about the political), but is instead a blanket concept meant to bring together all of the ways in which human beings may be governed: the ethical government of oneself, the government of the family, the management of populations and individuals by state apparatuses, etc. It is worth noting here what Foucault says in “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom” on this subject: “I am saying that ‘governmentality’ implies the relationship of the self to itself, and I intend this concept...to cover the whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize, and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other. Those who try to control, determine, and limit the freedom of others are themselves free individuals who have at their disposal certain instruments they can use to govern others.” (Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 300.)

⁴¹ *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, 194.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 194-95.

towards other objectives than those proposed by the apparent and visible official governmentality of society.”⁴³ Such movements, without going into all of the detail Foucault does in the text regarding why he chooses this term, are aptly referred to as forms of counter-conduct.

But Foucault is quite careful to specify that counter-conduct is not simply *any* response to a given political, economic, cultural or religious situation. Such acts of resistance are “distinct from political revolts against power exercised by a form of sovereignty, and they are also distinct [from economic revolts against power] inasmuch as it maintains or guarantees exploitation.”⁴⁴ But if “they are distinct in their objective” because “They are revolts of conduct,”⁴⁵ they are also and again distinct in the forms that they must necessarily take. This is because counter-conduct is by definition responsive to the precise forms of conduct against which it contrasts itself. This is one part, though an important part, of what he means when he says that there is “an immediate and founding correlation between conduct and counter-conduct,”⁴⁶ and also part of what he calls the “non-autonomous specificity of these resistances, these revolts of conduct;”⁴⁷ that is, a specificity conditioned by precise goals and means, themselves conditioned by the conduct against which one reacts.

This relationship is evident in the specific historical cases that Foucault describes in *Security, Territory, Population*, all of which are of responses to *Christian* structures in recognizably *Christian* terms. Specifically, within the brief history of what Foucault calls the pastorate here, he is not interested in what he refers to as “external blockages” or even those forms of resistance called heresies, let alone acts of full conversion, but rather “the forms of

⁴³ Ibid., 199.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 196.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 197.

attack and counter attack that appeared *within* the field of the pastorate.”⁴⁸ These forms of Christian counter-conduct “tended to,” or at least intended to, “redistribute, reverse, nullify, and partially or totally discredit pastoral power in the systems of salvation, obedience, and truth...[within] the objective, the domain of intervention of pastoral power.”⁴⁹ Thus “the struggle was not conducted in the form of absolute exteriority, but rather in the form of the permanent use of tactical elements that are pertinent in the anti-pastoral struggle, insofar as they fall within, in a marginal way, the general horizon of Christianity.”⁵⁰

In other words, Christian counter-conduct took place, necessarily, *within* the horizon of Christianity, and consisted in a struggle perhaps not over the ultimate doctrines of the faith in their broadest sense, but over how to understand and deploy them in real belief and practice. Christianity was thus the field of intelligibility for both pastoral conduct *and* (for example) ascetic or dissenting counter-conduct. Indeed, Foucault’s examples in this case are in most, if not all, instances taken to gain their strength by claiming to be more ‘authentically Christian’ than the pastoral structure against which they react.

It is for this reason that leaving Christianity altogether by converting to another religion, for example, would *not* constitute counter-conduct (although we *could* imagine cases where it *might*). Conversely however, acting to re-define the very nature and means of Christian salvation in the face of given structures, the authority of which comes precisely from their claim to mediating such salvation, is *exactly* the formal model of what Foucault means by counter-conduct. The game, after all, has its rules, and while they may very well be bent, to break the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 204.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 215. While I would insist that the question of the *marginality* of the raw materials of these different forms of counter-conduct is actually more complex, the point is taken.

constitutive rules of that field of intelligibility would be to depart from the form of resistance called counter-conduct altogether.

III. Ethical Subjectivation and The Care of the Self

The example of the pastorate, from which the notions of conduct and counter-conduct emerge, remains a relation of power subject to the positive, relational analytics that Foucault introduces in *La volonté de savoir*. It is by “conducting the flock,” through various practices, that its members are constituted as subjects—subjects whose actions are managed precisely by that conduct. But if the constitution of the subject is both the site and stake of power relations, and if power is only exerted open free, resisting subjects, then practices of counter-conduct must on some level address given forms of conduct once again on the level of subjectivity. It is in this way, at least primarily, that counter-conduct is representative of resistance within Foucault’s understanding.

To be clear, counter-conduct is not the model of resistance: the two are not synonymous, nor is the former the general template for the latter. Counter-conduct is rather one historical form that resistance may take, and does not exhaust the former category. But as a representative form, and indeed one of the few conceptual examples of resistance that Foucault ever really begins to elaborate, it does tell us quite a bit about the general idea of resistance and its status as a consequence of the productive, relational analytics of power that Foucault articulates in the years before *Security, Territory, Population*. And in so doing, it can be argued that the idea of counter-conduct lays the groundwork for the more explicitly “ethical” conceptions that would soon appear in Foucault’s work. Insofar as any act of resistance takes place on the level of the

constitution of implicated subjects, in terms of *who one is*, then it is no longer an act of “subjection,” but instead a practice of what he calls *subjectivation*.

In *The Uses of Pleasure*, Foucault describes subjectivation in terms “of the way in which individuals are urged to constitute themselves as subjects of moral conduct...the models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by itself, for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object.”⁵¹ Compared to the more “passive”—though even this framework is complex—idea of subjection to larger institutions (the hospital, prison, or church), this notion of subjectivation generally refers to the “active” relationship that one has to oneself and the practices by which that relationship is given form and consequence. Practices of subjectivation have taken on many historical forms, though the most privileged for Foucault, and the form that concerns me here, is that of what he calls the ethics of the care of the self in ancient philosophical practice.

III.i. Spiritual Exercises and The Care of the Self

“Ethics” in this case, or what Foucault sometimes calls “ascetics,” are characterized by what he refers to here in terms of “the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object,” whose history is “understood as a history of the forms of moral subjectivation and of the practices of the self that are meant to ensure it.”⁵² The history of ethics, on Foucault’s definition, is, in other words, a history of spiritual exercises, of an “interior effort,” or of practices of self-overcoming.

⁵¹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, 29.

⁵² *Ibid.*

Just as subjection occurs through various practices tied to various institutions, the form of subjectivation that Foucault calls the ethics of the care of the self is understood as a process by which “the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of the self,”⁵³ in strategic relation to the constellations of power within which one finds oneself. And while moral codes and ideal principles are important (to varying extents)⁵⁴ within such regimens of practice, Foucault is far more concerned with “moralities in which the strong and dynamic element is to be sought in the forms of subjectivation and the practices of the self...Here the emphasis is on the forms of relations with the self, on the methods and techniques by which he works them out, on the exercises by which he makes of himself an object to be known, and on the practices that enable him to transform his own mode of being.”⁵⁵ It is, after all, only by studying “the forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself *qua* subject,” the practices themselves, what he calls the “self-forming activity,” which would allow Foucault to “analyze what is termed the subject” in its various forms of historical emergence and determination.

These practices of the self through which such a transformation occurs (or is at least attempted) are that “kind of work...of the self on the self,” which is “an elaboration of the self by the self, a progressive transformation of the self by the self for which one takes responsibility in a long labor of asceticism (*askēsis*).”⁵⁶ But if Foucault refers to such activity in the language of “asceticism,” it must be understood as “asceticism in a very general sense—in other words, not in the sense of a morality of renunciation but as an exercise of the self on the self by which one

⁵³ Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 291.

⁵⁴ See *The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, 30.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, 16.

attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being.”⁵⁷ This asceticism fundamentally “involves a series of practices” which are “a set of actions by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures oneself.” These practices, in the ancient context at least, are again redolent of Hadot’s studies, and include “for example, techniques of meditation, of memorization of the past, of examination of conscience, of checking representations that appear in the mind, and so on.”⁵⁸ We have already seen many other examples in Chapter 1.

III.ii. On the Politics of Ethics

However, if what I have suggested about power and resistance in general, and counter-conduct in particular, is true across the board for Foucault, it should be clear that a kind of practical reason plays an important role in precisely *which* spiritual exercises one engages in. That is, the forms that ethical practices of self-constitution must take is highly determined by the *telos* toward which they are directed. Those goals or ends are themselves determined by the demands or needs one finds oneself faced with—the reasons for which one takes up such practices in the first place. This means that practices of the care of the self too carry with them the strategic, mobile, and responsive status characteristic of power relations more broadly.

Indeed, at one point late in “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” the rather intriguing question is posed to Foucault as to whether or not “this care of the self, which possesses a positive ethical meaning, [can] be understood as a sort of conversion of power?” To this he replies unequivocally, “A conversion, yes. In fact, it is a way of limiting

⁵⁷ “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 282.

⁵⁸ *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, 11.

and controlling power.”⁵⁹ And if all that I have said thus far has been coherent, then at least some of the reasons why this is the case, and at least some of the ethical-political implications of this broader insight should be increasingly clear.

We can say that [1] if ‘who one is,’ is implicated within the relations of power within which one finds oneself, and [2] if one’s goal is to be governed differently, “by other leaders (*conducteurs*) and other shepherds, toward other objectives and forms of salvation, and through other procedures and methods,” and [3] if the fact of the possibility of freedom and resistance within relations of power means that one can participate *differently*—strategically—in one’s own subjection (or more accurately, subjectivation), then [4] in *certain* cases the strategic engagement in practices of the self (or of the community, etc.) that re-shape precisely *who one is* or who one may be, can lend significantly to that goal. If one wants to be governed differently, then one must begin, in certain interesting cases, by *being different* in a way that responds to or circumvents the apparatus of subjection within which one finds oneself.

Ethical subjectivation, understood in this way as a form of resistance, can take on any number of forms. As we have already seen, the example of counter-conduct may well be the first time that Foucault concretely details a historical form of ethical subjectivation as a strategic response to broader moral and political conditions. But among all of the possible examples, there is at least one very general constellation of practices that seem to most interest Foucault—indeed, which seem to offer the greatest promise *as a model* (though a model potentially reconceived and re-worked under all of the appropriate specifications and disclaimers). In his own words, “I am referring to what might be called the ‘arts of existence.’ What I mean by the phrase are those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of

⁵⁹ Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 288.

conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves, in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.”⁶⁰

Either way, it is through this grouping of concepts, which emerge directly from the logic of the analytics of power, that we can begin to see just how the revaluation of the relationship between ethics and politics is *also* a direct consequence of the analytics of power. The political is not the “sum” of the ethical here, nor is the ethical—understood as the active and intentional constitution of oneself as a subject through a relationship to oneself mediated by spiritual exercises—simply a byproduct of relations of power. Instead, the relationship between ethics and politics is dialectical, not causal; as a consequence of the analytics of power, neither is reducible to the other, and neither is absent in the other. They are inextricably knit together and co-constituting; indissociable from and irreducible to one another.

On a “spiritualist” or moralist reading of the ethics of the care of the self, one that does not account for this fundamental reformulation, it would be possible to take Foucault to be advancing precisely the kind of political reductionism that this view necessarily precludes. One could, on such a mis-reading, simply assume that the ultimate strategic consequence of Foucault’s ethics is a vapid moralism along the lines of the famous mis-quote, so often and so radically incorrectly ascribed to MK Gandhi that one must “be the change one wishes to see,”⁶¹ or the like.

⁶⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, 10-11.

⁶¹ In fact, this oft-repeated slogan, attributed to M.K. Gandhi, is—if it has any connection to Gandhi at all—a mis-paraphrase of a text of Gandhi’s published in 1913, on the subject of snakebites. See MK Gandhi, “General Knowledge About Health; 12. Accidents: Snakebite,” in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1964).

But we must be clear: “ethics” cannot, and does not “replace” politics on this view. In fact, because their relationship to one another has been reconceived, such a “replacement” would be impossible. If relations of power constitute the subject, then the subject constitutes relations of power, and that must go both ways. Indeed there is a further consequence here, one that has been surprisingly ignored in discussions of Foucault, power, and ethics: If conditions of governance, political, economic or otherwise, are a form of power relations which constitute the subjects which live and work within them, then explicitly political action on those forms of governance is *also* one form that practices of self-constitution can take. Put simply: *Political action may also be a form of the care of the self.*

This consequence is directly reminiscent of Friedmann, and it is precisely the political-ethical relationship of the self to the community that I describe in Chapter 4, with the help of King. The relationship of the self to itself can take on many and complex forms, at least one of which is shaped, mediated, and constituted through action on the larger structural, institutional aspects of those relations of power within which one finds oneself. Thus if the care of the self is a kind of political work insofar as certain forms of direct intervention on the level of the subject necessarily shift those power relations which shape the subject, then on Foucault’s model, political action which targets larger structural and systemic forces is also, logically and necessarily, a kind of “work on oneself.”

Insofar as relations of power are in play, and for Foucault they always are, then political work has ethical effects *at least*, and is a form of ethical subjectivation *at most*. In the same way, and for the same reasons, there may be cases in which forms of ethical subjectivation are themselves robust and non-trivial forms of political action. If, in order to create a different world we must constitute ourselves differently through practices of subjectivation, then in order to be

different on the level of who or what we are, we must create a different world on the level of the institutional and political structures which bind and constitute subjects in and through relations of power.

But this does not at all mean that all forms of subjectivation are in fact forms of resistance: If Foucault, and indeed Friedmann and Hadot, have been clear about anything, it is that the historical specificity, the content of the struggle, the relations of power which frame it and the precise *ways in which* they frame it, all matter. In the political context, it is not enough to simply “care for oneself,” if the care of the self is not in some way a form of the care of the other.

How then, exactly, under what circumstances and in what forms, can the care of the self necessarily constitute a care of the other? And conversely, as the two are never necessarily identical in a given historical iteration, how can the care of the other, and indeed the care of the city and of the community—of *others*—constitute a form of the care of the self? If the path from power to ethics that I have charted here is at all coherent, then it is by these questions that we may begin to understand the politics of Foucault’s ethics. Not all historical forms of the care of oneself constitute the care of the other, and the care of the other by no means necessarily amounts to a care of the self. Indeed, even particular cases in which practices of the self result in an attention to the other cannot simply be “reversed:” even complementary practices of other-directed political or ethical care in such cases do not in practice necessarily amount to practices of ethical subjectivation. Put more succinctly: to give to oneself does not necessarily amount to giving to the other, and to give to the other, even to the city, does not necessarily amount to caring for oneself. Our question, then, is how to identify and understand those cases where it *does*—or where it does, in very least, in one direction, if not the other.

For Foucault, and indeed for Hadot, there is at least one instance where the care of the self necessarily amounts to the care of the other, and of others. And it is found in the philosophical life, the “true life,” of the Cynic Diogenes.

IV. The Figure of Diogenes

The question which emerges from Foucault’s ethical analyses, and which is indeed the question of moralism itself (as understood by Friedmann), is thus and again: how, in what forms, and under what circumstances can the care of the self constitute a form of the care of the other? And conversely, how might the care of the other, and indeed of *others* however construed, amount to a form of the care of oneself? Put in slightly more precise terms: how can practices of self-change at once amount to the ethical transformation of others? How can spiritual exercises operate to shape and transform the practicing subject *through* forms of work which shape the material and ethical lives of others, the city, the community?

For Pierre Hadot, there is at least one figure and one form of life which may answer this question for us: that of Diogenes of Sinope, the Cynic “dog,” “Socrates gone mad.”⁶² “Like Socrates,” Hadot reminds us, “Diogenes thought he had been entrusted with the mission of making people reflect, and of denouncing their vices and errors with his caustic attacks and his way of life.” And it was in that way of life, the forms and the means by which Diogenes pursued his mission, that “His care for himself was, indissolubly, care for others. And although Socratic care of the self, by making people attain inner freedom, dissolved the illusions of the appearances and phantoms linked to social conventions, it nevertheless retained a kind of smiling urbanity, which disappeared with Diogenes and the Cynics.”⁶³

⁶² Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 110.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 111.

In his final lectures at the *Collège de France*, Foucault again follows Hadot, in a series of analyses that evince perhaps uncharacteristically high praise for the Cynic form of life as embodied by Diogenes and others. Further still, we can see in his final lectures on the particular form of *parrhesia* practiced by the Cynics, precisely what Hadot is talking about, and therefore just why the concentric circles of Foucault's work (from power, to the subject, to truth, and so on), would ultimately lead him to Diogenes's makeshift home.

IV.i. The Life of the Dog

As Hadot reminds us, Diogenes the Cynic was called by many names. Plato's often-repeated description of the Cynic as "Socrates gone mad,"⁶⁴ was perhaps the most flattering. Conversely, the epithet "dog," while a far less complimentary comparison, could be seen as arguably the most accurate: on the criteria of both critics and Diogenes himself. We will return to the reasoning behind the Cynic adoption of the "insult" dog, conceived in ways that are importantly inseparable from the very logic of his critics below. But in order to do so, we must begin with the Cynic life itself, the life of the philosophical "dog."

As Hadot describes it, "The Cynic way of life was spectacularly opposed not only to the life of non-philosophers but even to the lives of other philosophers."⁶⁵ Indeed, where "other philosophers differentiated themselves from their fellow citizens only within certain limits... The Cynics' break with the world, by contrast, was radical. They rejected what most people considered the elementary rules and indispensable conditions for life in society: cleanliness,

⁶⁴ This title was allegedly bestowed upon Diogenes by Plato himself (*ibid.*, 110.) See also Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Books 6-10*, trans. R.D. Hicks, vol. II, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 55.

⁶⁵ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 108.

pleasant appearance, and courtesy.”⁶⁶ They were “absolutely unconcerned with social proprieties and opinion; they despised money, did not hesitate to beg, and avoided seeking stable positions within the city. They were ‘without a home, without a country, miserable, wandering, living from day to day.’ Their bags contained only what was strictly necessary for survival. They did not fear the powerful, and always expressed themselves with provocative freedom of speech [*parrhesia*].”⁶⁷

Concern and Unconcern. There is, however, something slightly but potentially misleading within Hadot’s characterization and framing here, and by his own account. We cannot in fact say that the Cynics were “unconcerned” with the social norms, forms of propriety, or even public opinion. Or rather, to be much more precise, we cannot confuse “unconcern” or “plainness of living” as a *spiritual exercise*, with a lack of concern for the ethical lives of oneself and others. In fact, it is clear that the Cynic life was fundamentally shaped by a deep and abiding concern *with and by* precisely the norms that Hadot mentions. As Foucault puts it, the Cynic’s concern for others is evinced immediately in the very form of Cynic life. The Cynic is, after all, humanity’s guard dog and “humanity’s spy [*kataskopos*; ‘scout’ or ‘spy’],” the one who returns “to tell humanity the truth, to tell humanity frankly and courageously all the dangers it might face and where its true enemies are to be found.”⁶⁸ And it is for that reason that their form of life is characterized not by a mere rejection of propriety and opinion, but rather by an aggressive, insistent, unrelenting attack on them.

In both Hadot’s analyses and Foucault’s own, this crucial point can be confusing at first. The Cynic was, after all, “the man with the staff, the beggar’s pouch, the cloak, the man with the

⁶⁶ Ibid., 109.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 170-71.

long beard, the dirty man. He is also the man who roams, who is not integrated into society, has no household, family, hearth, or country...and he is also a beggar. We have many accounts which testify that this kind of life is absolutely at one with Cynic philosophy and not merely an embellishment.”⁶⁹ The Cynic was thus, by all accounts, the very model of the ascetic sage, living a life of “reduction,” as Foucault puts it.

And yet, Foucault, Hadot, and the ancient sources on which they draw are all adamant that the Cynics did not practice a form of social retreat. The Cynic reduction did not amount to an abandonment of the “cares” of the world and of the city. As Hadot notes, “Cynicism was...a popular, missionary philosophy. From the time of Diogenes, the Cynics had been ardent propagandists who addressed themselves to all social classes.”⁷⁰ In fact, if they had simply detached themselves from the world, they would not have been able to play the role that they did, and would not have been able to unite the care of the self and care of the other. Foucault makes the point slightly differently, emphasizing that this “mode of life is...an integral part of the Cynic’s philosophical practice.” Further still, “the role of this mode of life is not just to correspond harmoniously...to the Cynic’s discourse and veridiction.” It goes beyond the “homophonic function” of even Socrates’ “life and his use of parrhesia.” Instead, the Cynic form of life, “(staff, beggar’s pouch, poverty, roaming, begging) has very precise functions in relation to [Cynic] *parrhesia*, this truth-telling.”⁷¹ For Foucault, Cynicism was the most thorough form of lived *parrhesia* in the ancient world, and therein lies its special value for him. And the life of truth, the “true life,” could not, by definition, be a life of retreat.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 170. As he puts it elsewhere: “The blazon of Cynicism is—we have already spoken about this—the man in the short cloak, with the long beard, bare and dirty feet, begging pouch, and staff, who is found on the street corner, in the public square, and at the temple door questioning people and telling them some home truths.” (ibid., 193.)

⁷⁰ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 108.

⁷¹ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, 170.

In other words, the spiritual demands which motivated the Cynics were neither abstract nor detached, but worldly, engaged, and uncompromisingly bound up with the life of the city. The precise *form* that the Cynic life would take, the acts and practices which so uniquely marked it out, were directly shaped by this concern. And it is for that very reason that the shameless life of the Cynic “dog” emerges as it does.

We see the characteristically aggressive, at times subtle, and often humorous engagement in the many anecdotes from the lives of Diogenes and other Cynics, especially as cataloged in Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. In Chapter two of Book VI, on Diogenes the Cynic, we can also see how the life of the latter was characterized first by a profound simplicity—or, perhaps more accurately, an ongoing aspiration to a simplicity modeled on nature—in which the scandalous life of the dog was rooted, and from which it emerged. Indeed, the dog’s life was, it seems, constituted by a living dialectic of simplicity, hardship, scandal, and, for Foucault, truth. And it is precisely at the confluence of these factors that the care of the self meets the care of the other in the Cynic form of philosophical life.

IV.i.a. The Plainness of Living.

Following his exile from Sinope⁷²—and it must be kept in mind, Diogenes was an exile⁷³—he made his way to Athens, and “fell in with Antisthenes,” who would become his teacher.⁷⁴ Unable to procure more standard living arrangements (or impatient with the person who was charged with arranging them for him), “he took for his abode the tub in the

⁷² The details of Diogenes’ exile are debated, but the varying accounts seem to agree that the events surrounding it have something to do with what would later become his philosophical mission to “deface the currency.” (See Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Books 6-10, II, 23.)

⁷³ Indeed, as Diogenes Laertius reports, “When someone reminded him that the people of Sinope had sentenced him to exile, ‘And I them,’ said he, to home-staying.” (ibid., 51.)

⁷⁴ Ibid., 25.

Metroön...And in summer he used to roll in it over hot sand, while in winter he used to embrace statues covered with snow, using every mean of inuring himself to hardship.”⁷⁵ The simplicity of his abode and the *askesis* which he practiced were constitutive of the Cynic form of life, and therefore of Cynicism as a philosophy. As Hadot puts it, “Cynic philosophy was exclusively a choice of life: it was the choice of freedom—complete independence (*autarkeia*) from useless needs—and the refusal of luxury and vanity (*tuphos*).”⁷⁶

Foucault takes what he calls this “reductive function” within the Cynic form of life slightly further however, situating it within his analysis of *parrhesia*, or truth-telling. In Foucault’s terms, the Cynic works to reduce “all the pointless obligations which everyone usually acknowledges and accepts, and which have no basis in nature or reason. This mode of life as the reduction of all pointless conventions and all superfluous opinions is clearly a sort of general stripping of existence and opinions in order to reveal the truth.”⁷⁷ The “reductive function” thus worked to strip away accepted conventions, concepts, and practices, to bring to light an underlying “truth,” not in terms of particular propositions or views, but rather in the form of what Foucault calls the *true life*, or the parrhesiastic life.

In Hadot’s terms again, it can be said that Diogenes both inhabited and pursued *autarkeia* via *tuphos*: freedom through a “plainness of living”⁷⁸ instructively evinced in both the practice and development of his radical form of philosophical life. For Foucault however, the “reduction” of *tuphos* also lays bare the truth—and at once constitutes and allows for parrhesia itself. This does not mean that *autarkeia* or independence is simply another term for “truth” here, but rather

⁷⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁶ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 109.

⁷⁷ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, 171.

⁷⁸ See Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Books 6-10, II, 39.

that, for Foucault, Cynic practices of independence and plainness of living were themselves practices of the truth and embodied manifestations of *parrhesia*. On this reading, the many stories told of Diogenes, in his simplicity and in his scandal, take on a kind of valance that we do not see in Hadot's brief comments, but which can be seen to explicitly build on his reading. And in order to see how the care of oneself and the care of the city come together, we must chart the subtle relationships between this growing list of concepts.

Diogenes Laertius famously describes the way in which, "One day, observing a child drinking out of his hands, [Diogenes] cast away the cup from his wallet with the words, 'A child has beaten me in plainness of living.' He also threw away his bowl when in like manner he saw a child who had broken his plate taking up the lentils with the hollow part of a morsel of bread."⁷⁹ Diogenes' "plainness of living" was not, in other words, simply a given or a pre-ordained state, but rather an ongoing spiritual exercise in itself. As Hadot puts it, "The Cynic way of life consisted in an almost athletic, yet reasoned training to endure hunger, thirst, and foul weather, so that the individual could acquire freedom, independence, inner strength, relief from worry, and a peace of mind which would be able to adapt itself to circumstances."⁸⁰ Indeed, "adaptation" and "plainness"—and what we might even call "adaptation to plainness"—were at once principles, *teloi*, and practices: "Through watching a mouse run about...not looking for a place to lie down in, not afraid of the dark, not seeking any of the things which are considered to be dainties, he discovered the means of adapting himself to circumstances."⁸¹

It is thus in this way that, as Hadot says, even though there are "many typical Cynic philosophical concepts...they are not used in logical argumentation. Instead, they serve to

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 110.

⁸¹ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Books 6-10*, II, 25.

designate concrete attitudes which correspond to the choice of life: *askēsis*, *ataraxia* (lack of worry), *autarkeia* (independence), effort, adaptation to circumstances, impassiveness, simplicity or the absence of vanity (*atuphia*), lack of modesty.”⁸² Diogenes’ philosophical commitments did not simply extend to or merely inform his way of life, they *were* his way of life: “Being reproached for eating in the market-place, ‘Well, it was in the market place,’ he said, ‘that I felt hungry.’”⁸³ Indeed, his “plainness of living,” extended even to his attitude toward death: “Being asked whether he had any maid or boy to wait on him, he said ‘No.’ ‘If you should die, then, who will carry you out to burial?’ ‘Whoever wants the house,’ he replied.”⁸⁴ Further, “some say that when dying he left instructions that they should throw him out unburied, that every wild beast might feed on him, or thrust him into a ditch and sprinkle a little dust over him. But according to others his instructions were that they should throw him into the Ilissus, in order that he might be useful to his brethren.”⁸⁵

Every moment, action, and decision took the form of a spiritual exercise—a fully lived care for himself—both marked by and illustrative of tightly woven philosophical commitments. His “refusal of vanity” (*tuphos*) was a practice of freedom (*autarkeia*), constantly adjusted, re-framed, and re-embodied through the adaptation to circumstances he learned from children and mice: “On being asked what he had gained from philosophy, he replied, ‘This at least, if nothing else—to be prepared for every fortune.’”⁸⁶

Diogenes’ athletic commitment to a total form of life could not let up, even for a moment. “Nothing in life” he maintained, “has any chance of succeeding without strenuous practice; and

⁸² Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 110.

⁸³ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Books 6-10, II, 59.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

this is capable of overcoming anything.”⁸⁷ As Diogenes Laertius elaborates, Cynic practice, and thus Cynic life was wholly unified:

[Diogenes] used to affirm that training was of two kinds, mental and bodily: the latter being that whereby, with constant exercise, perceptions are formed such as secure freedom of movement for virtuous deeds; and the one half of this training is incomplete without the other, good health and strength being just as much included among the essential things, whether for body or soul. And he would adduce indisputable evidence to show how easily from gymnastic training we arrive at virtue. For in the manual crafts and other arts it can be seen that the craftsmen develop extraordinary manual skill through practice. Again, take the case of flute-players and athletes: what surpassing skill they acquire by their own incessant toil; and, if they had transferred their efforts to the training of the mind, how certainly their labors would not have been unprofitable or ineffective.⁸⁸

In this way, the Cynic life was a complete life, a wholly integrated spiritual exercise, relentless even in the face of death: “To those who said to him, ‘You are an old man; take a rest,’ ‘What?’ he replied, ‘if I were running in the stadium, ought I to slacken my pace when approaching the goal? Ought I not rather to put on speed?’”⁸⁹

IV.i.b. The Hound of Heaven and the Scandal of Cynic Life

But if the life of Diogenes was that of a coin, and if one face was emblazoned with this child-like plainness of living, the other bore the scandalous effigy of the “hound of heaven.”⁹⁰ Adopting the epithet of “dog,” as it was hurled at him, his simple material needs were inextricably tied to an aggressive bark directed outwork toward the city.

Foucault provides four differing criteria for the “dog’s life” as the true life, four ways in which the hound of heaven embodied a total form of lived *parrhesia*:

First, the *kunikos* life is a dog’s life in that it is without modesty, shame, and human respect. It is a life which does in public, in front of everyone, what only dogs and animals dare to do, and which men usually hide. The Cynic’s life is a dog’s life in that it is shameless. Second, the Cynic life is a dog’s life because,

⁸⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 35.

⁹⁰ Diogenes Laertius reports that one “Cercidas of Megalopolis (or of Crete)...in his meliambics” referred to Diogenes as “a true-born son of Zeus, a hound of heaven.” (ibid., 79.)

like the latter, it is indifferent. It is indifferent to whatever may occur, is not attached to anything, is content with what it has, and has no needs other than those it can satisfy immediately. Third, the life of the Cynic is the life of a dog, it received the epithet *kunikos* because it is, so to speak, a life which barks, a diacritical (*diakritikos*) life, that is to say, a life which can fight, which barks at enemies, which knows how to distinguish the good from the bad, the true from the false, and masters from enemies. In that sense it is a *diakritikos* life: a life of discernment which knows how to prove, test, and distinguish. Finally, fourth, the Cynic's life...is a guard dog's life, a life which knows how to dedicate itself to saving others and protecting the master's life. Shameless life; indifferent life; diacritical, distinguishing, and, as it were, barking life; and guard's life, guard dog's life.⁹¹

We have already seen how the plainness of living was at once “shameless” and “indifferent,” and moreover the ways in which these were not simply principles, but spiritual exercises in themselves.

But Diogenes could not accomplish his mission by moderate means, nor simply by example—no matter how scandalous the example. Simply living in public and wearing the threadbare cloak, let alone spoken discourses or the written word, could either fully accord with his own ideals *or* have the jarring force necessary to crack the shell of convention.⁹² Only the “hound of heaven,” with a bite to match his bark, could succeed here: “Being asked what he had done to be called a hound, he said, ‘I fawn on those who give me anything, I yelp at those who refuse, and I set my teeth in rascals.’”⁹³ The shamelessly indifferent dog must also be the barking watchdog, correcting and protecting humanity, even the “rascals.”

Thus to say, as Diogenes Laertius does, that “he was great at pouring scorn on his contemporaries”⁹⁴ would certainly be an understatement; scorn was, after all, the mildest thing he would ever “pour” onto others. When “Someone took him to a magnificent house and warned him not to expectorate...having cleared his throat he discharged the phlegm into the man's face,

⁹¹ (Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, 243.) I will return to the third and fourth below.

⁹² In this, it might be argued, there is something of a genealogical project present in Diogenes' very form of life; future pursuit of this question may be fruitful.

⁹³ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Books 6-10*, II, 63.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

being unable, he said, to find a meaner receptacle.”⁹⁵ Perhaps most famously, “At a feast, certain people kept throwing all the bones to him as they would have done to a dog. Thereupon he played a dog’s trick and drenched them.”⁹⁶ Similarly, “It was his habit to do everything in public, the works of Demeter and Aphrodite alike.”⁹⁷ And, “Behaving indecently [masturbating] in public, he wished ‘it were as easy to banish hunger by rubbing the belly.’”⁹⁸

And yet, these were not mere acts of indecency; they always had a philosophical, indeed a pedagogical, purpose. Such displays and affronts constituted both the ongoing practice of his own philosophical commitments, and, as odd as it may sound, a “care” for others which took the form of an aggressively instructive attack on “what most people considered the elementary rules and indispensable conditions for life in society,”⁹⁹ what Foucault calls the “diacritical” bark. This bark aimed consistently—like a Socrates gone mad—to bring thoughts and actions into full accord with the philosophical ideals which he trained every day to himself embody. As Foucault describes it: “one must make one’s life conform to the precepts one formulates.... There can only be true care of self if the principles one formulates as true principles are at the same time guaranteed and authenticated by the way one lives.”¹⁰⁰ This conformity, this coherence, is the first and final criterion of the “true life,” the embodied parrhesia, of the Cynic.

This notion of the true as that which is “straight” and “coherent” is a crucial component of the parrhesiastic life of the Cynic. It is a true life not simply because it is “unconcealed,” or because it puts “true” ethical maxims on display—its truth is not merely the truth of true statements. The “*Logos alēthēs* is not just a set of propositions which turn out to be exact and can

⁹⁵ Ibid., 33-35.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 49.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 71.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 109.

¹⁰⁰ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, 239.

take the value of truth.”¹⁰¹ Rather, the “true life” is true as love is true, friendship is true, and as a wheel or mechanism is “true” when it aligns perfectly with the broader apparatus, allowing it to operate in full and proper harmony. The true life is thus like “an instrument, mechanical part, etc.: accurately formed, positioned or aligned; correctly calibrated. Also of a line or something linear: straight, accurate, without deviation.”¹⁰² And, moreover, as the true life of the Cynic is not simply a life which evinces a given truth, but rather inexorably practices the truth; the Cynic is the one who *true*s herself and others, in the verb-sense of this form of truth: “To make true; to give the precise required form or position to; to make straight, level, round, etc., to the desired degree.”¹⁰³ The Cynic is thus much more like the wheelwright or the skilled mechanic of Friedmann’s cacophonous and ill-lit factory, the one whose very life is an act of transforming the world, rather than merely interpreting it. The Cynic is not only the one who “is true,” but the one who necessarily *true*s both themselves and others.

This notion of truth, of the parrhesiastic life, also has methodological consequences—if the Cynic’s life can be considered a “method.” For one central example, the goals and the ideals that motivated that life were even at the heart of the Cynic’s general rejection of philosophical writing and even systematic discourse: “Hegesias having asked [Diogenes] to lend him one of his writings, he said, ‘You are a simpleton, Hegasias; you do not choose painted figs, but real ones; and yet you pass over the true training and would apply yourself to written rules.’” Hegesias is not a simpleton for “simple” reasons, however.

Diogenes’ reproach here is not rooted in the idea that, for example, spoken discourse is somehow more authentic than the written word. Rather, it emerges in no small part from the

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 220.

¹⁰² “True, adj., n., adv., and int., 6.a.,” in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹⁰³ “true, v. 2. transitive.,” in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Cynic ideal—an ideal that is at once a spiritual exercise—of adaptation to circumstances, the lesson of the mouse. In other words “written rules” cannot prepare us “for every fortune,”¹⁰⁴ when “nothing in life...has any chance of succeeding without strenuous practice.”¹⁰⁵ And if philosophy must amount to that “preparation,” life itself must consist, *directly*, in that training, just as it did for Diogenes. So it is not that the painted figs are a flavorless and inedible version of the real thing—though they are that as well—but rather that we can only learn (and indeed enjoy) the taste of figs from real ones. In the same way, we can only train ourselves for life through a life that consists in such training itself.

For Diogenes, the dry ink of the “written rule” may have some role, but it certainly cannot prepare us for life in the city in the way that simply *living in the city* will. It is in this way that Diogenes collapses the distinction between preparation before the fact and action in the moment. It is a direct rebuke to *all* of the other Hellenistic schools, and a rebuke that takes precisely the form of its own ideal, and is practiced at every level and at every moment: “Observing a fool tuning a psaltery, ‘Are you not ashamed,’ said he ‘to give this wood concordant sounds, while you fail to harmonize your soul with life?’ To one who protested that he was ill adapted for the study of philosophy, he said, ‘Why then do you live, if you do not care to live well?’”¹⁰⁶ Similarly, “Certain parents were sacrificing to the gods, that a son might be born to them. ‘But,’ said he, ‘do you not sacrifice to ensure what manner of man he will turn out to be?’”¹⁰⁷ And “When someone declared that life is an evil, he corrected him: ‘Not life itself,

¹⁰⁴ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Books 6-10, II, 65.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

but living ill.”¹⁰⁸ In other words: Diogenes lived the *true life* in order to bring others into the *true life*.

IV.ii. The Other Life and the Care of the Other.

It is precisely here that the great value of Cynicism emerges for Foucault. It is also here, in the very idea of the true life, that we may begin to answer the question with which we began: on the possibility of a non-reductive politics of ethics, or a case in which, as Hadot describes it, the care of oneself is “indissolubly, care for others,”¹⁰⁹ and vice-versa.

IV.ii.a. The True Life and the Other Life.

There were many other philosophers, from many other schools—Socrates, above all—for whom “the relationship between truth-telling and mode of life [falls]...within the general framework of [a] homophony between speaking and living.”¹¹⁰ And yet, even for Socrates, there remains a kind of gap on Foucault’s reading. He practiced *parrhesia*, true speech, to be sure, lived according to his ideals, and died for them. And yet, on this view, not even Socrates *lived his ideals* in the way that Diogenes had:

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 57. Diogenes Laertius also reports the following list of examples: “When one day when he was gravely discoursing and nobody attended to him, he began whistling, and as people clustered about him, he reproached them with coming in all seriousness to hear nonsense, but slowly and contemptuously when the theme was serious. He would say that men strive in digging and kicking to outdo one another, but no one strives to become a good man and true. And he would wonder that the grammarians should investigate the ills of Odysseus, while they were ignorant of their own. Or that the musicians should tune the strings of the lyre, while leaving the dispositions of their own souls discordant; that the mathematicians should gaze at the sun and the moon, but overlook matters close at hand; that the orators should make a fuss about justice in their speeches, but never practice it; or that the avaricious should cry out against money, while inordinately fond of it. He used also to condemn those who praise honest men for being superior to money, while themselves envying the very rich. He was moved to anger that men should sacrifice to the gods to ensure health and in the midst of the sacrifice should feast to the detriment of health. He was astonished when slaves saw their masters were gluttons, they did not steal of some of the viands. He would praise those who were about to marry and refrained, those who intending to go on a voyage never set sail, those who thinking to engage in politics do no such thing, those also who purposing to rear a family do not do so, and those who make ready to live with potentates, yet never come near them at all.” (ibid., 29-31.)

¹⁰⁹ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 111.

¹¹⁰ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, 169.

the relationship between truth-telling and way of life in the Cynics is, I think, far more complicated and precise. In the first place, this is because the Cynic mode of life is not just a life which demonstrates and manifests virtues like temperance, courage, and wisdom, which Socrates had given evidence that he possessed. The mode of life which is entailed and presupposed, which serves as framework, support, and also justification of *parrhesia*, is characterized by extremely precise and codified forms of behavior, by highly recognizable forms of behavior.”¹¹¹

Beyond even Socrates,

“Cynicism is not satisfied with coupling, or establishing a correspondence, a harmony or homophony between a certain type of discourse and a life conforming to the principles stated in that discourse. Cynicism links mode of life and truth in a much tighter, more precise way. It makes the form of existence an essential condition of truth-telling. Finally, it makes the form of existence a way of making truth itself visible in one’s acts, one’s body, the way one dresses, and in the way one conducts oneself and lives. In short, Cynicism makes life, existence, *bios*, what could be called an alethurgy, a manifestation of truth.”¹¹²

For the Cynic, there is a complete “absence of any distinction, gap, or contradiction between their words and deeds.”¹¹³

Thus, the appeal of Cynicism for Foucault is found in the fact that here, and perhaps only here, “The very body of the truth is made visible, and laughable, in a certain style of life. What is manifested in Cynicism is life as the immediate, striking, and unrestrained presence of truth. Or again: truth as discipline, asceticism, and bareness of life. The true life as the life of truth.”¹¹⁴ In so doing, however, the Cynic life also “Presents itself essentially as a certain form of *parrhesia*, of truth-telling, but which finds its instrument, its site, its point of emergence in the very life of the person who must thus manifest or speak the truth in the form of a manifestation of existence.”¹¹⁵ It is a life that does not simply “speak” the truth verbally, but through a parrhesiastic courage that manifests at every level of material being.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 169-70.

¹¹² Ibid., 172.

¹¹³ Ibid., 199.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 173.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 217.

The Cynic's bark is thus "the idea of a mode of life as the irruptive, violent, scandalous manifestation of the truth,"¹¹⁶ the spirit of "ensuring that one's life bears witness, breaks, and has to break with the conventions, habits, and values of society."¹¹⁷ And it is in this way that any form of life modeled on Cynic parrhesia "must manifest directly, by its visible form, its constant practice, and its immediate existence the concrete possibility and the evident value of an *other* life, which is the true life."¹¹⁸

IV.ii.b. Cynic Intelligibility

At the same time, and crucially, the radically "other life," the true life itself, was not something that existed outside of the life of the Greek city—at least not yet. While Diogenes and the Cynics in general represented what Hadot calls a "limit case"¹¹⁹ among the ancient schools, they did not inhabit a space *outside* Greek philosophical culture *or* Greek culture more broadly. There is a profound and crucial difference between the dog's life on the margins and an existence that is wholly foreign or outside. This is because Cynic life, in order to pursue its mission, had to be radical enough to jar people, but remain wholly intelligible to the grammar and syntax of the culture and values that it sought to upset and thereby transform.

As Foucault carefully puts it, Cynicism is "a very particular form of life, on the fringes of institutions, laws, and recognized social groups: the Cynic is someone truly on the fringes of society who moves around society itself without being acceptable or taken in....At the same time Cynicism appears as the universal core of philosophy."¹²⁰ In his own terms, Diogenes knew that

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 183.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 184.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 109.

¹²⁰ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, 201.

he was the sort of dog that men “admired,” but also feared—because they feared their own inability to keep pace with him, and knew they lacked the stamina to engage in the athletic training that would one day allow them to: “When asked what kind of hound he was, he replied, ‘When hungry, a Maltese; when full a Molossian—two breeds which most people praise, though for fear of fatigue they do not venture out hunting with them. So neither can you live with me, because you are afraid of the discomforts.’”¹²¹ Thus when the Greeks saw Diogenes, they necessarily had to know what they were looking at: the form of life he both practiced and offered had to make enough sense to, crudely put, to appeal to others. He lived at the fringes, though crucially *not* beyond the gates.

The hound’s life had to represent the kinds of values that, on some level, already made sense to the Greeks of the day, in order for it to constitute a form of life that could be both praised and feared—rather than simply dismissed—while still striking and unpredictable enough to leave a mark. Thus, as Foucault puts it, “The paradox of Cynicism is that it formed the commonest elements in philosophy into so many breaking-points for philosophy. This is what we must try to understand: how can Cynicism be basically what everyone says and yet make the very fact of saying it unintelligible?”¹²² Not *wholly* unintelligible, but rather at once liminal, strange, and familiar enough to matter:

The fact that Cynicism is always both inside and outside philosophy (the familiarity and strangeness of Cynicism in relation to the philosophy which serves as its context, milieu, vis-à-vis, opponent, and enemy), the Cynic constitution of the philosophical life as a scandal, is the historical stamp, the first manifestation, the point of departure for what has been, I think, the great exteriorization of the problem of philosophical life in relation to philosophy, to philosophical practice, to the practice of philosophical discourse.¹²³

¹²¹ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Books 6-10, II, 57. Elsewhere, Diogenes Laertius reports that “[Diogenes] described himself as a hound of the sort which all men praise, but no one, he added, of his admirers dared go out hunting along with him.” (ibid., 35.)

¹²² Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, 233.

¹²³ Ibid., 237.

This strange intelligibility is thus constitutive of the Cynic life as the true life. And it is by living a form of the true life that a figure like Diogenes is able, as Hadot says, to conjoin care for himself with his care for others, in a way that cannot be disentangled.

It was for this very reason that Diogenes set the bar so high, both in caring for himself and caring for others: “He used to say that he followed the example of the trainers of choruses; for they too set the not a little high, to ensure that the rest would hit the right note.”¹²⁴ Cynic unpredictability and strangeness were indexed to an ideal that others would recognize and respect, even when do so in an extreme form. And if that extremity was unattainable for most, Diogenes’ life itself provided a perfectionist model astounding enough to wake people up, and comprehensibly appealing enough to then strive toward—to whatever extent may have been possible.

IV.ii.c. The Care of the Other as Care of the Self.

The Cynic life, then, is “the fulfillment of the true life, but as a demand for a life which is radically other.”¹²⁵ That demand is, as we have seen, manifested through a radical break with convention, through a radical reduction or “plainness of living.” But, as Diogenes is clear, the Cynic life is not a point of stasis, but rather an ongoing and total *practice*, a spiritual exercise, a form of the care of the self. For Foucault, it is a practice of truth, in multiple forms and on multiple levels: the true life of the Cynic is a life of embodied parrhesia, in which that very mode of life itself does not simply *speak* the truth, but barks it out in scandalous form.

¹²⁴ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Books 6-10, II, 37.

¹²⁵ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, 270.

For this reason, the parrhesiastic life was not merely a life in accord with itself. It was not *simply* a model (though it was that as well).¹²⁶ As Foucault puts it, “The Cynic is of service in a very different way than through leading an exemplary life or giving advice. He [or she] is useful because he battles, because he bites, because he attacks.”¹²⁷ The Cynic is capable of this bark because the true life takes the form “of deliberate endurance, of endless work on self by which he is always pushing back the limits of what he can bear. At the heart of this monarchy of the Cynic, which is a monarchy in fact and not just ideal, you find again the relentless work of self on self.”¹²⁸ In fact,

It is important to understand that this activity, by which one is useful to others in the exercise of a sovereign life on itself, is a surplus, as it were, an excess, or rather it is nothing more or nothing less than the other side of the relation to self. Exercising perfect mastery over oneself, bearing witness to this mastery in the eyes of others and, through this testimony, helping them, guiding them, serving as an example and model, are only different aspects of one and the same sovereignty.¹²⁹

But we can take this point even further than Foucault does here: As we have seen through the testimony of Diogenes Laertius, the courageous scandal of the Cynic’s bark is an active, ongoing intervention *through* the form of one’s life into the lives of others. But it is also, at the same time, reciprocally and necessarily, *an ongoing practice of the self through that very intervention into the lives of others*. The Cynic does not simply “push back the limits of what he can bear” alone as a preparatory exercise, but *through his engagements with others*. This is

¹²⁶ “The sovereign life is therefore a life of assistance and help to others (student or friend). But it is useful to others in yet another form: this is inasmuch as it is a sort of lesson of universal significance which is given to humankind by the very way in which one leads this life in full view of everyone. The sage, leading the sovereign life, can and will be useful to humankind through the example he offers...the sovereign life is a lesson of universal significance through its splendor, through the brilliance with which it adorns humankind. This is an idea which you find expressed very clearly in Epictetus when he says that the safe is like that small red thread on the senator’s toga, (the laticlave). The ornament of the senator’s toga is the red thread, the red stripe, which indicates the person’s rank and status. In the same way, the sage must be like the red thread in the fabric of humanity which assures the brilliance and splendor of humankind.” (ibid., 272.)

¹²⁷ Ibid., 279.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 278.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 273.

precisely what Hadot means when he speaks of a care of the self that is “indissolubly” a “care for others,” in that this insight cuts both ways: for Diogenes, as we have seen, everything is practice, and the Cynic’s outward bark is therefore always also an “inward” bark.

In other words, and finally: If all things require relentless practice; and if the best form of practice for life is not the preliminary or preparatory forms of the other schools, but rather the true life itself; and if the parrhesiastic life seeks to right or true the lives of others and of the city as its ultimate and necessary *telos*; and if one’s ability to live the true life is dependent on practicing the true life; and if, finally, practicing the true life means caring for others, cultivating the true life within them as well; then *the care of others is necessarily a form of the cultivation of the parrhesiastic life in oneself, and vice-versa*. For the Cynic, to care for oneself, one must care for others; and to care for others, one must thus care for oneself.

V. Conclusions: The Politics of the Subject At Present

We may now return to the February 17 lecture of the *Hermeneutics*, the crucial passage with which we began:

And in this series of undertakings to reconstitute an ethic of the self, in this series of more or less blocked and ossified efforts, and in the movement that we now make to refer ourselves to this ethic of the self without ever giving it any content, I think we may find it impossible today to constitute an ethic of the self, even though it may be an urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task, if it is true after all that there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself.¹³⁰

The relationship to oneself, as we have seen, does not take on a political valance by an abandonment of structural and material questions. The politics Foucault refers to here are not a

¹³⁰ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, 252.

reduction or retreat to the ethical domain of individual behavior, scaled up and taken in aggregation. Foucault is neither a moralist in Friedmann's sense, nor a neo-liberal in any sense.

Such readings are precluded first and foremost by the analytics of power, and in turn by the ethics of the care of the self as, in the end, a form of the analytics of power. Foucault's otherwise enigmatic claim here is instead an articulation of the "chain" of governmentality, of "connecting up" the ethical and the political, in a way that necessarily entails a reformulation of that connection itself: Neither the ethical lives of individuals nor the political lives of groups, systems, and material being, are determinative of one another in a merely causal way, nor can one simply "produce" the other, insofar as they are considered otherwise separate domains. Rather, relations of power constitute subjects, which constitute relations of power; just as, for Friedmann, in laboring on the environment, we labor on ourselves, and so on. The relationship is dialectical, mutually co-constituting, and thereby irreducible; any distinction, whatever its historical origins, can at best only be made for analytic purposes. This is a necessary aspect of the definition of governmentality, relations of power, and indeed of ethics for Foucault.

Against this understanding, we are thus able to see some of what is at stake in the lessons on Diogenes, and to grasp another aspect the value of the Cynic's true life for Foucault. It is not simply that Diogenes provides the historical, genealogical model of a form of life in which the care of the self and the care of the other are finally coterminous. It is further that the true life of the Cynic is also the cultivation of a form of life that is both *new* and *other*. The Cynic is thus not only the hound of heaven and the ethical wheelwright, but is perhaps a kind of midwife as well. And, on Foucault's account, in fostering the birth of forms of life that are both new and other, the Cynic *may* in turn—recalling the logic of the analytics of power—also, necessarily, help give birth to a *world* that is new and other.

But Foucault does not provide any criteria to determine which kind of new world is preferable. This, he argues, is not his job. And this rejection is consistent with his work in general, in his focus on practices rather than moral codes, and on the historical emergence of forms of subjectivity, rather than positing his own prescriptive ethical or political “code.” What is perhaps strange, however, is that if the ethics of the care of the self, as a constellation of practices of self-change, is indeed a “politically necessary” practice, Foucault does not actually analyze in detail the forms of practice which could provide some of the most powerful historical elaborations of the political consequences of his ethics.

Specifically, I mean to emphasize the fact that, whether millenarian or revolutionary, and with only the possible exception of his limited intervention on Iran, Foucault never actually analyzes a mass movement of any kind. More precisely, he does not analyze any historical instances of *collective* action in which “the strategic codification of...points of resistance that [make] a revolution possible,”¹³¹ itself takes the form of spiritual exercises. The analysis of the ancient Cynics demonstrates the possibility of forms of practice in which the care of the self and the care of the other are identical and coterminous. And it is true that this criterion would be necessary for any kind of mass practice of the self, or “practice of the community,” that would not amount to a kind of moralism.

However, while the Cynic model helps demonstrate both the historical possibility and theoretical necessity of that criterion, it remains unclear within Foucault’s researches what it would mean to “scale up” such practices. Thus it is only through the positive genealogical critique of mass organization, of political-spiritual exercise on a scale and in a form which is able

¹³¹ *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, 96.

to conterminously—dialectically and holistically, rather than causally—shape individuals, *groups*, and material conditions, that a genuine politics of self-overcoming can be evinced.

It is with precisely this kind of study that I will now conclude: with Martin Luther King Jr. and his fellow organizers, through their work during the 1955-1956 bus boycott at Montgomery Alabama, one of the most important and thoroughly documented mass movements in both US history and in the 20th century more broadly.

Chapter 4: The Practice of Dignity:

Martin Luther King Jr., Self-purification, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott

“Did we have a leader? Our leaders is just we ourselves.”

—Claudette Colvin, *Supreme Court Testimony*,
Browder v. Gayle, May 11, 1956¹

I. Introduction: One Evening in November.

Among the remarkable scenes recounted in *Stride Toward Freedom*, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King’s historical reflections on the Montgomery bus boycott, is an encounter of sorts that occurred one night in November of 1956. The news had just come down that the Supreme Court had ruled in favor of the boycotters, but there remained an interim period while the court’s mandate was still making its way to Alabama, and during which the boycott was yet maintained.² The predictable but no less terrifying response from certain quarters of the opposition was quick in coming, but it was the collective reply of the African American community to those actions that King takes to be so extraordinary. He recounts the event in question as follows:

That night the Ku Klux Klan rode. The radio had announced their plan to demonstrate throughout the Negro community, and threats of violence and new bombings were in the air. My mail was warning that ‘if you allow the n***** to go back on the buses and sit in the front seats we’re going to burn down fifty houses in one night, including yours.’ Another letter cursed the Supreme Court and threatened ‘that damn Hugo Black’: ‘When he comes to Alabama we’re going to hang you and him from the same tree.’

Ordinarily, threats of Klan action were a signal to the Negroes to go into their houses, close the doors, pull the shades, or turn off the lights. Fearing death, they played dead. But this time they had

¹ Claudette Colvin, “Transcript of Record and Proceedings, Browder v. Gayle, May 11, 1956,” in *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, ed. Stewart Burns (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 77.

² *Browder vs. Gale* was the case before the United States District Court for the Middle District of Alabama in which, on June 4, 1956, it was ruled that Montgomery’s bus segregation laws were unconstitutional; the Supreme Court decision to uphold the district court’s ruling was handed down on November 13, 1956, and the bus boycott officially ended on December 20, 1956. As King says, it would take about four or five days for the mandate to reach Montgomery. (Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, The King Legacy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 155.) King also describes this incident in “We Are Still Walking,” his contribution to Liberation Magazine’s December 1956 “Salute to Montgomery;” (Martin Luther King, “We Are Still Walking,” in *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, ed. Stewart Burns (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 320.)

prepared a surprise. When the Klan arrived—according to the newspapers, ‘about forty carloads of robed and hooded members’—porch lights were on and doors open. As the Klan drove by, the Negroes behaved as though they were watching a circus parade. Concealing the effort it cost them, many walked about as usual; some simply watched from their steps; a few waved at the passing cars. After a few blocks, the Klan, nonplussed, turned off into a side street and disappeared into the night.³

King’s description here seems, on a surface reading, to recount the quite natural and understandable response of a group of people very recently emboldened by a concrete political victory, with the behavior of the community members in defiance of the Klan rooted in the Supreme Court decision. And yet, to approach this passage in light of King’s overall reflections and insights in *Stride Toward Freedom* and elsewhere, such a neatly causal political story is quickly undermined. This occurs by way of a subtle series of small clues here and the intellectual and historical context provided elsewhere, which together constitute an invitation to consider all that must necessarily have gone in to bringing such a moment about.

What we have here, at its simplest and most extraordinary, is a group of people who are no longer afraid. Or, to be more accurate and to do justice to the courage and effort that King highlights in facing this particular threat in this particular way, we can say that if the people represented here had been afraid of the Klan before, that fear underwent a kind of transformation. In either case, what is significant is that they are no longer afraid (or not in the same way) of something (in this case a different group of people) of which even given the political context of this event (and perhaps as a *result* of that context) they have good and demonstrable reasons to be fearful. As King suggests, if the people were still afraid in some sense (or angry, or any number of emotions appropriate to such a situation), and reasonably so,

³ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 155.

what is significant is that now they were *less so*, or perhaps more accurately, afraid still but *in a different way*, and certainly in a manner that is now accompanied by a new courage.⁴

And so, if we do not necessarily find of a pure and simple *lack* of fear represented in this scene (though such a lack is certainly possible), King is clear that we do find the community in question with a new, different, and in important ways more powerful relationship not simply to the Klan as threat and enemy, but to its own fear, and thereby to itself. If it is accurate, such a claim quickly raises the question of exactly what the content of the term “fear” is in this context, of what we can possibly mean when we say that one was once afraid of the Klan, but now is no longer, or at least that one *fears differently*. *What exactly has changed?*

I.i. The Grammar of Fear

We typically speak of fear in several different ways, but there are at least two distinct registers that are often taken to be synonymous. In thinking of the citizens of Montgomery in the passage above, we can posit two equally acceptable ways to represent the change in question. [1] One might first speak as we so often do in terms of fear and *need*, and say something like “there is *no need* to fear anymore,” or even “we don’t *have to* fear” the Klan anymore. [2] Alternately, one might use the language of *being*, and simply say “we are no longer afraid,” or “I’m not afraid anymore.” It is easy to elide these two different sorts of statement, to take them as saying exactly the same thing, certainly in the context of everyday speech. But in this exercise of imagining both kinds of statement within the context of Montgomery toward the end of the boycott, it is

⁴ I speak here of fear, as should be quite obvious, as a privileged analytical example, and one relevant to the case in question, *not at all or in any way* because I take it to be the only—or even necessarily the most dominant—emotion at play in a scene like this. My goal here is simply to isolate one specific and pertinent aspect of that emotional life in the service of a work that seeks to illuminate and explore the significance of this text and the history it recounts.

possible to see a potentially profound difference in what one could mean when one says either [1] “I don’t have to be afraid anymore,” or [2] “I’m not afraid anymore.”

The first conception, the language of *need*, is arguably most in line with the view more likely to emerge from a cursory reading of the relationship between the Supreme Court decision and the events of the evening in question. However, it is also this language of need that most quickly falls apart on closer inspection. In this context, this way of speaking would suggest that it is a structural or systemic change that is most relevant, and which bears a straightforwardly causal relationship to action in Montgomery that night. In such a causal picture, it is the political victory that has given rise to the courage displayed in the face of the Klan.

On this reading, because the law had removed the legal apparatus undergirding segregation, it thus barred the Klan and its tactics from any recourse to the law. Thus the latter’s vigilante activity (which was at least in part concerned with enforcing legal segregation through terroristic strategies) was either less likely to be tolerated, or the law itself would henceforth be much more reliable in preventing and punishing such actions. In this way, one “need not” be afraid any longer, since the *cause* of that fear has been either removed or significantly altered. That which gives rise to such fear no longer has the legal protection (and implicit sanction) that it once did, and has thus been removed from the sphere of concern of the community in question. One might also have a less charitable view of the boycotters and say that because one legal impediment had been removed, they somewhat naively responded by assuming that all sorts of other threats had been taken away as well, or were simply so overwhelmed that they were led to ignore an otherwise clear threat. Whether or not such readings are accurate to the text (as the latter two suggestions clearly are not), in all of these possibilities the causal story retains the same form, although the specifics are understood slightly differently.

But there are two points worth making explicit with regard to this understanding and what it implies: First, no one in Montgomery, neither King, nor the rest of the movement leadership, nor the rank-and-file, (indeed, no one in their right mind) would believe that the actual *cause* for fear had been removed in this case. King is quite clear about this in several places, including in the passage cited above. King is clear that the members of the Montgomery community had seen and undergone far too much to rush to such quick conclusions. No one, certainly not anyone in the boycott movement, was naïve enough to think that the Supreme Court decision would have any bearing on the Klan, let alone make it less of a threat. Second, even if *a cause were removed*, that cause still *remains fearful*, but would just happen to be *absent*. That absence *itself* does not take away its status as a source of terror, especially if, for example, it was to reappear. Even a Klan newly constrained by the law—to whatever extent such an idea makes any historical sense—is still a terrifying idea (and institution) in and of itself.

As I have already intimated, to say on the one hand something like “I am still afraid of the Klan, but the Klan is no longer ‘present’ and thus I need not fear it anymore (or right now)” or, on the other hand, something like “I am no longer afraid of the Klan (at least not in the same way I that had been previously),” turn out to be two *very* different positions, politically, ethically and otherwise. And in some sense, the clarification of just that difference will constitute much of the substance of the present work. Given the points King raises about the effort involved in presenting oneself to such a familiar threat as the citizens of Montgomery did that night, not to mention the realities of Klan activities and the extremes to which that group has historically gone, it is only the second understanding which can be taken as accurate to the situation.

We thus have both philosophical and historical reasons to believe that in this case it is more accurate to say, “I am no longer afraid” than “I need not fear any longer.” The difference,

at its most fundamental, is dependent upon the ways in which we understand the relationship of given subjects to the relations of power in which they participate. Here, the reasons and potential causes of my past fear very much remain, but it is my *relationship* to those causes in and through my relationship to my own fear (and thus to *myself*) that has been altered. And what has changed is most fundamentally something, to borrow the language of Hadot, Friedmann, and Foucault, ‘on the level of the self and of being;’ that is, something about the people involved in *who they are*, rather than something causally predicated on a specific political change. The difference here is that we are now, finally, also speaking of the relationship of a community to itself, along and with the individual subjects or “selves” that constitute it. Indeed, I argue in this chapter that these transformations, on the level of the ethical self-constitution of the collective and individual subjects as they are engaged in the Boycott, are themselves the very condition of the political victory and subsequent structural changes—rather than the other way around.

I.ii. Direct Action and the Politics of “Self-purification.”

By his own account, and despite the volumes of writing that King has left, there is very little systematic articulation of his political-religious views in general, and on the topic of nonviolent resistance in particular. As he says in response to the eight Alabama clergymen whose statement of April 12, 1963 prompted the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” “Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all of the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work.”⁵ It was the condition of his incarceration then, that allowed King what was by his own understanding the rare time and

⁵ Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in *Why We Can’t Wait, The King Legacy* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1963), 85.

opportunity to respond to such criticisms in “patient and reasonable terms.” The upshot, for our purposes here, being that the “Letter” arguably constitutes one of the clearest, most systematic, and extended articulations of King’s views on an entire range of issues. And it is for that reason that it is with the Letter that the kind of philosophical reconstruction required for the task at hand here must begin. While my focus here will be Montgomery, it is clear that the same intellectual, ethical, political, and religious commitments articulated in Birmingham are very much at the heart of the earlier campaign, even if in a more nascent form.

In the opening pages of the “Letter,” King articulates the “four basic steps” that necessarily constitute any campaign of nonviolent direct-action. They are: “collection of the facts to determine whether injustice exists; negotiation; self-purification; and direct-action.”⁶ With regard to Jim Crow and legal segregation, as one iteration in a long history of institutional racism, it is no exaggeration to say that African-Americans have been “collecting the facts” for centuries. In the case of Birmingham, like Montgomery and so many other places before it, “There can be no gainsaying the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community...Its ugly record of brutality is widely known.”⁷ And the precise forms by which that injustice operated, some of the under-explored details of the ways in which it *worked*, are on this account central to understanding both legal victories in the courts and ethical victories of the kind with which we began.

Like almost all of the campaigns of the civil rights era, the second stage in Birmingham, the stage of attempted negotiation, bore little to no fruit. Even the minor concession of removing “humiliating racial signs”⁸ from storefronts was short-lived. Thus, “As in so many past

⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁷ King continues: “Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation.” (ibid.)

⁸ Ibid., 88.

experiences, our hopes had been blasted, and the shadow of deep disappointment settled on us. We had no alternative but to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community.”⁹ For this reason, we can see the second stage of negotiation as itself an extension of “the collection of facts,” the initial investigative stage. Indeed, through these two preliminary exercises the community in Birmingham (like Montgomery and many communities before) did not simply perform its due diligence, but assessed and explicitly articulated the clear but sometimes implicit constellation of injustices at issue, their individual and collective effects, *and* some of the forms of resistance they could expect to face.

In this way, even good-faith negotiation can be seen to serve as a form of the necessary work of assessment and articulation: a critical specification of what is possible, what is necessary, and a further study, even if only as a byproduct, of the contours of the resistance that one must prepare to face. This would even include the specific form and extent of that resistance from different figures and groups within the community: the white power structure in these cities both was and was not monolithic, and different responses, even different negative responses, could be expected from clergy and merchants, police and councilmen. *All* of this information would matter in the resulting articulation, preparation, and concrete forms of action that would be required to address the conditions in question.

It is for this reason that on my reading, both the collection of facts and even the stage of attempted negotiation, can be understood as the explicit articulation of the spiritual demands presented by the situation. King’s first two steps thus jointly constitute the precise, methodical diagnosis of the spiritual demands particular to this political and ethical crisis. Further still, we

⁹ Ibid.

might even think of these stages in particular, and the politicization of a given community more generally, as a crucial aspect or stage in what Foucault calls the “mode of subjection.”¹⁰ That is, the way in which one comes to recognize oneself as duty-bound to engage in direct action, *and* the ethical, religious, and political terms that both condition the possibility of that recognition and shape the concrete, practical forms that it must take in action.

The conditions of *de jure* segregation are, on this reading, thus understood in terms of spiritual demands, of the form that we have already explored in Hadot and Friedmann. The stages of both “collecting the facts” and even good faith negotiation, thus constitute the necessary diagnostic practice of assessing and articulating those demands. However, this diagnostic work does not only catalyze those forms of experience into political action, but specifies the possible forms that recognizing oneself as the subject of an ethical-political call to action can and must take.

In the “Letter,” following these first two stages, King describes the third, that of “self-purification.” Here, self-purification is specifically understood as a form of *preparation* for direct action, a constellation of practices of the self, of *work* on oneself—not alone, but in the company of others—that provide the ethical conditions for ongoing direct action. In Birmingham, like Montgomery before, the latter took the form of “sit-ins, marches, and so-forth,”¹¹ among many other practices. For King and others however, those actions would only be possible, let alone successful, on the condition of an entire range of practices that constitute the process of self-purification. Following the failure of the white merchants in Birmingham to negotiate, King reports that “We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would

¹⁰ See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, 27. See also, “On The Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of a Work in Progress,” 264.

¹¹ King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 89.

present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community. Mindful of the difficulties involved, we decided to undertake a process of self-purification.”¹² King continues, describing, albeit briefly, the forms that the process of self-purification would take: “We began a series of workshops on nonviolence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves: ‘Are you able to accept blows without retaliation?’ ‘Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?’”¹³

It seems clear then, that in the case of the movement, the work of preparatory self-purification took the form of training and workshops in nonviolent techniques, skills that would allow one to undergo specific—and familiar—forms of physical and emotional hardship. On my reading, the fundamental question is one of understanding *what* exactly is being “purified?” What is being removed or exorcised from the individuals and communities participating in direct action through these practices? *How* do such practices “purify” one, exactly? And perhaps above all: is such purification, with its clear ethical and religious associations, in fact a *necessary* condition of the explicitly political work of sit-ins, marches, economic boycotts, and direct action more generally? Is King correct, and if so how, that direct action requires self-purification? Or is this simply a laudable but ultimately unnecessary ritual? A morale-boost at best, and a moralistic distraction at worst?

The answer to that question, as I have argued over the course of the previous chapters, lies precisely in both the spiritual demands to which the Boycotters in Montgomery (for example) were responding and by which they were motivated, as well the *telos* toward which their work aimed. On my reading, and as the November action against the Klan begins to demonstrate, legal segregation understood solely or even primarily in terms of juridical

¹² Ibid., 88.

¹³ Ibid.

repression can account for neither its historical operation nor the efficacy of the tactics deployed in Montgomery.

I thus argue that based on King's account (at least), the conditions of segregation are not primarily conditions of repression, but rather of *subjection*, on the model of Foucault's understanding. They are, on this model, conditions within which repression (again in Foucault's terms) is one aspect in a web of constructive power relations. And in that way, they comprise one aspect of the relations of power within which the constitution of subjects is intimately and inextricably tied to the emergence, proliferation, and maintenance of a set of juridical-legal conditions. I articulate this claim through an investigation of what I follow King in arguing are two of the central axes of subjection by which *de jure* segregation necessarily operated: the closely linked production of fear and dehumanization. I will not claim here that these two axes of subjection in any way exhaust either legal segregation in Montgomery in the 1950s *or* individual and systemic racism in the United States more broadly. Rather, and to be as precise as possible, they were two central forms of constructive disciplinary power, operating on the level of the self and of being for the community in question (and others like), which were among the necessary conditions for the maintenance and operation of a set of legal and economic structures.

It is for this reason that I argue in turn that the spiritual-political demands produced by *de jure* segregation required the strategic articulation and deployment of practices of collective subjectivation in order to ultimately shift and replace the legal and political conditions of institutional racism in Montgomery, in the South, and in the U.S. as a whole. In other words, the situation required and thus gave rise to a *genuine politics of self-overcoming*, which take concrete form in the third and fourth aspects of King's schema: self-purification and direct action itself. Indeed, just as I have already suggested that both "fact collecting" and "negotiation" in

King's terms already complicate and further specify the diagnostic work of identifying spiritual demands, I will argue that both self-purification *and* direct action will here constitute closely-linked but not identical sub-categories of spiritual exercise. In the concrete historical case of Montgomery however, we will finally be able to see a clear, necessary, and fully reciprocal relationship between the care of the self and the care of the other, self-change and political transformation, and above all the ethical labor of constituting new forms of dignity which operate directly on the conditions under which both individual and community further co-constitute one another.

The Boycott thus provides a historical model for that concept which it has been the ultimate goal of this project to fully articulate: a historically concrete politics of collective self-overcoming, successfully undertaken within living memory—even as that memory is currently fading. And while this model would be impossible to either recognize or articulate without the groundwork provided by Hadot, Friedmann, and Foucault up to this point—they themselves either could not, or simply did not, demonstrate or articulate it fully.

I.ii.a. On the Shoulders

I do not claim that the aspect of the Boycott that I want to bring to light here—its form as a collective practice of ethical-political self-change—is either an exhaustive definition of the Boycott or a sufficient condition of its efficacy. This is in no way to make the quasi-moralist claim that the Boycott can *only* be understood in this way, and that the forms of ethical self-change that I argue here do indeed define it in many ways also *exhaust* that definition.

Nor is my goal to somehow divorce the Boycott from the larger history and context of the Civil Rights struggle, including the many forms of both protest and legal intervention that

precede and frame both the Boycott itself and the *Browder vs. Gale* decision. Indeed, we cannot so much as begin to understand the Montgomery Boycott of 1955 without acknowledging the role of the Baton Rouge bus boycott of 1953, and the individuals and organizations which mobilized there. Baton Rouge, though much briefer and on a smaller scale,¹⁴ was well acknowledged by the Montgomery organizers to be a direct inspiration. Montgomery leaders like King, E.D. Nixon, and others, sought the insights of organizers¹⁵ like the Reverend T.J. Jemison, of Baton Rouge's Mt. Zion Baptist Church. Similarly, it would be just as difficult to understand Montgomery without the backdrop of the far more famous and wide-reaching *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, et. al.* decision in May of 1954, which ended *de jure* segregation in public schools.¹⁶

Further still, however, and slightly further back, the Boycott also emerged against the backdrop of a longer tradition of activism, direct action, and legal intervention against segregation more broadly. Among these can be counted A. Philip Randolph's original March on Washington Movement which, in 1941, successfully pressured President Roosevelt to sign Executive Order 8802, desegregating the defense industry. Not long after, in July of 1944, Irene Morgan, a mother of two traveling via Greyhound from Virginia to Maryland was arrested for refusing to give up her seat in the "colored" section of the bus for a white couple. This event resulted in the 1946 *Morgan v. Virginia* ruling, which outlawed segregation on interstate busses. The *Morgan* ruling, in turn, resulted in the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, which would later inspire the 1961 Freedom Rides.

¹⁴ The Baton Rouge boycott lasted less than a week, from June 19–24, 1953.

¹⁵ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 61-62.

¹⁶ It would also be difficult to remove the Baton Rouge movement from the context of the *Brown* case, which bookended the former in some sense. (*Brown* was first argued in December of 1952, then again a year later in 1953, with the final decision handed down in May of 1954).

This is just a scattering of the major legal events that framed the events in Montgomery in 1955 and 1956. There is no doubt that they played some role there, just as Montgomery would play a role in Birmingham, in the March on Washington, and so on. And yet, to simply tell the story of Montgomery, and the night in November with which we began, in terms of the relationship between successive Supreme Court decisions, or even of legal challenges in general would raise fundamental methodological, philosophical, and political concerns. Indeed, to tell that story along a simple along a causal-legal axis could not do justice to the specificity of the movement, the experience of the participants, and the depth and forms of transformation that both constituted the movement *and* which it brought about.

This is not, then, a causal account. Rather, my goal is to provide a kind of corrective: to first and very simply draw attention to the status and indeed the *necessity*—and the depth of that necessity—of collective practices of ethical self-overcoming in the ongoing transformation of the structural and legal, ethical and religious, personal and cultural, reality of this particular time, place, and struggle. In other words, my aim is not to explain *why* the Boycott happened, but to instead say something about how it worked.

I.ii.b. The “First and Final Point,” Revisited

Recall Foucault’s claim in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* that “there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself.”¹⁷ On my reading, to understand what Foucault means here is to understand and to do greater justice to the complexity and representative force of the events of that evening in November of 1956. And to understand the ways in which this insight intersects with the events in Montgomery, will be to,

¹⁷ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, 252.

finally, fill in the practical and philosophical lacunae in the accounts of Hadot, Friedmann, and Foucault that I have taken such care to specify over the course of this project. In King's recounting of the Montgomery bus boycott, the event in question takes up a mere paragraph. However, when approached in a certain way and with a certain care, it will tell us a great deal about the full complexity of the nature of the bus boycott as a whole, its strengths, its limits perhaps, its strategic dynamics and something fundamental about its lasting import. And it will, I hope to demonstrate, tell us even more about the care of the self, spiritual exercises, the interior effort, and what King calls self-purification. It will finally and fully articulate their potential, and potentially necessary, role in shaping and re-shaping the "exterior" conditions within which subjects live, work, and practice.

II. Segregation and Subjection.

Following the corrective description of his overall project in "The Subject and Power,"¹⁸ Foucault identifies "three modes of objectification that transform human beings into subjects,"¹⁹ roughly corresponding to differing texts and periods in his work.²⁰ The second mode of the subjection of human beings falls under what he calls "dividing practices," which are described in the corresponding texts (*The History of Madness* above all) as forms of *partage*.²¹ In such practices, "The subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others...Examples are the mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, the criminals and the 'good boys.'"²² There is perhaps

¹⁸ "The Subject and Power," 326.

¹⁹ Ibid. One might hesitate to say that these further correspond in an unproblematic way to different forms that relations of power may take, but as he is quite clear that it is, again, the constitution and shaping of subjects that is at stake in these examples, it seems at very least methodologically safe to think through these distinctions in those terms as well.

²⁰ The first mode describes the sort of work undertaken in a text like *The Order of Things*, concerning the human being as subject of its own knowledge. (See *ibid.*)

²¹ For the sake of both clarity and accuracy, I will maintain this French usage here.

²² Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 326.

no more seemingly appropriate addition to this list than *de jure* segregation in the United States from Reconstruction through the mid-twentieth-century. Jim Crow would thus seem to be among the ideal models of *partage* in Foucault's terms.

And yet, even in Foucault's own understanding, not even a seemingly straightforward system of partition can operate on a merely repressive model. As we have seen, such a theory of power cannot account for the historical details nor the full range of consequences of the examples that Foucault himself works through in various texts. Under scrutiny, it would seem that the same is true of Jim Crow and legal segregation, as that system, on King's own account, necessarily required the creation and maintenance of compliant Black subjects *and* white subjects willing to spontaneously uphold legal frameworks through extra-legal means.²³ For better or worse, this project will bracket the constitution of white subjectivities within the context of the Jim Crow South. Instead, I will return to King, in *all* of his roles (as organizer, preacher, orator, student, theologian, and philosopher of the movement), and the case for the role that the twin axes of fear and indignity played in the maintenance of the system in Montgomery and elsewhere.

II.i. Fear and Dehumanization.

Following the brief autobiographical account in *Stride Toward Freedom* of how it was that he came to be minister of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery in 1955, King surveys an entire range of institutional structures and practices constitutive of legal segregation

²³ In other words, even systemic forms of legal and economic racism require the creation of *racists* willing to not simply allow those structures to proliferate, but to take it upon themselves to reinforce them by means technically outside the law. The very existence of the Klan is compelling enough evidence to make this point. The Klan may be a vigilante organization, a form of domestic terrorism, but their historical activities before the 1960s *certainly* worked to maintain fully legal systems of division and exploitation.

in that city, by which “The two communities moved, as it were, along separate channels.”²⁴ The system was exhaustive, and included outright segregation in cases such as educational institutions and taxi services,²⁵ extending into a massive disparity in income and domestic material conditions,²⁶ a lack of legal recourse for black citizens and “the unequal justice of Southern courts” as exemplified by the Reeves case²⁷ and cases like it, and the plague (legal and otherwise) of voter disenfranchisement.²⁸

Each of these examples is in its own way representative of the wider system of segregation in its forms, tactics and effects; and, if necessary, each could on its own play the role of illuminating just what is at stake ethically and politically in situations of this kind. This is in no small part because in discussing each, however briefly, King never fails to remind us that questions of dignity versus indignity, fear versus courage, trust versus suspicion, weariness versus being at peace—the emotional or personal effects of the practices that necessarily accompany the material custom of demanding that two groups of people stand, shop, live, commute, etc. in two different places—are at the very heart of the situation as a whole, and are present in each of its instantiations.

However, there is perhaps something particularly significant about those insidious forms of segregation by which blacks and whites could physically inhabit the same space, but would be treated in radically different ways. Although the black and white citizens of Montgomery “used the same shopping centers...Negros were sometimes forced to wait until all the whites had been

²⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 14.

²⁵ “The schools of course were segregated, and the United States Supreme Court decision on school integration, handed down in May 1954, appeared to have no effect on Montgomery’s determination to keep them that way. If a white man and a Negro wanted to ride in a taxi together, they could not have done so, since by law white operators served white passengers exclusively and Negroes road in a separate system confined to them.” (Ibid.)

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 17–18.

²⁸ Ibid., 16.

served, and they were seldom given the dignity of courtesy titles.”²⁹ Among many other examples of this kind of practice, the bus system is of course the most famous. There “Negroes and whites...rode to work together at either ends of the same buses, with a sharp line of separation between the two.”³⁰ That “sharp line” was far more than a physical division, but was reinforced by practices and habits whose symbolic potency was equal to that of the purely material aspect of the division that these two poles served to co-constitute. King reminds us that it was in this context that “the Negro was daily reminded of the indignities of segregation,”³¹ describing, for example, the “abusive and vituperative” speech and actions of many white bus drivers toward black passengers: “It was not uncommon to hear them referring to Negro passengers as ‘n*****,’ ‘black cows,’ and ‘black apes.’”³² Further, “Negro passengers [frequently] paid their fares at the front door, and then were forced to get off and re-board the bus at the rear. Often the bus pulled off with the Negro’s dime in the box before he had time to reach the rear door.”³³

Given all of this, it is perhaps no surprise that what he describes as “an even more humiliating practice” with regard to the situation on the buses than those cited above would be the precise point from which the historic events of the year following King’s arrival in Montgomery would be set in motion. It was the ostensibly simple question of the seating itself that produced such “customs” as

forcing Negroes to stand over empty seats reserved for “whites only.” Even if the bus had no white passengers, and Negroes were packed throughout, they were prohibited from sitting in the first four seats (which held ten persons). But the practice went further. If white passengers were already occupying all of their reserved seats and additional white people boarded the bus, Negroes sitting in the unreserved section immediately behind the whites were asked to stand so that the whites could be seated. If the Negroes

²⁹ Ibid., 14–15.

³⁰ Ibid., 14.

³¹ Ibid., 27.

³² Ibid., 28.

³³ Ibid.

refused to stand and move back, they were arrested. In most instances the Negroes submitted without protest.³⁴

Even on those occasions where some individual would attempt to protest this situation, as in the case of the Reverend Vernon Johns, he or she would find themselves, at times quite literally, standing alone:

One day [Johns] boarded a bus and sat in one of the front seats reserved for whites only. The bus driver demanded that he move back. Mr. Johns refused. The operator then ordered him off the bus. Again Mr. Johns refused, until the driver agreed to return his fare. Before leaving, Mr. Johns stood in the aisle and asked how many of his people would follow him off the bus in protest. Not a single person responded.³⁵

King reports that Johns was plainly told a few days later when speaking with another passenger present during his attempted protest that he simply ought to have known better.³⁶

The case of Vernon Johns is an example not simply of the self-policing that is a *result* of the system, but rather one of the underlying tactics by which such a system operates at all. In such cases, we can see that forcing someone off of a bus or even having them arrested³⁷ are not simply mechanistic responses to breaches in given rules, and do not function alone. Rather, practices of humiliation and personal degradation necessarily accompany such a legal apparatus, in that they work to bring the system of segregation itself in line with the very self-understanding of subjected peoples. Subjection of this kind aims to preemptively command or control their behavior and potential responses, as a form of what Foucault calls the “conduct of conducts.” Even acts like arresting someone or forcing them off the bus, which we take to act upon a purely

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 24.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ See the example of the Claudette Colvin incident, Ibid., 28–29.

juridical subject, to use Foucault's terms, carry with them a productive force whose efficacy is of a piece with that of name-calling and making people stand over empty seats.

Here we may be reminded of Foucault's insistence on the productive nature of power relations, and of the sheer paltriness of a repressive conception "defined in a strangely restrictive way, in that, to begin with, this power is poor in resources, sparing of its methods, monotonous in the tactics it utilizes, incapable of invention, and seemingly doomed always to repeat itself."³⁸ Such an understanding cannot give to "power" the explanatory efficacy required, for example, to account for the process of internalization that left Reverend Johns exiting the bus alone that day. In his own way, and in his own terms, King was well aware of this dynamic, as evinced by his thoroughgoing concern not just for legal justice, but for the *dignity* of the community and his insistence, throughout this text and others, that the two are fundamentally inseparable. He also knew that in Montgomery the strategic balance of this dynamic was tipped dramatically toward the opposition.

Without in blaming or placing the causes of injustice on the African American community itself, King goes to great lengths in the text to point out the disastrous effects that segregation has had on the soul of the community, and "which needed to be remedied before any real social progress could be effected."³⁹ Insofar as such problems are not simply the result of given conditions, but serve a key role in maintaining them, the stakes of addressing them are clear to King. The "crippling factionalism"⁴⁰ within the community, a systemic indifference that "expressed itself in a lack of participation in any move toward better racial conditions and a sort of tacit acceptance of things as they were," as well as fears that any action would jeopardize the

³⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, 85.

³⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 21.

⁴⁰ See *Ibid.*

relative economic security of certain community members, and finally what he describes as a “sheer apathy,”⁴¹ all needed to be addressed directly.

On King’s account, this situation and these problems were rooted in what he calls “a far more basic force,” brought about perhaps not only by legal segregation in a given time and place, but by an entire history of such practices directed against the community, and which in turn served to sustain what King takes to be key ‘internal’ aspects of the conditions in question. This is what he calls a “corroding sense of inferiority, which often expresses itself in a lack of self-respect.”⁴² As he describes it,

Many unconsciously wondered whether they actually deserved any better conditions. Their minds and souls were so conditioned to the system of segregation that they submissively adjusted themselves to things as they were. This is the ultimate tragedy of segregation. It not only harms one physically but injures one spiritually. It scars the soul and degrades the personality, while confirming the segregator in a false estimate of his own superiority. It is a system which forever stares the segregated in the face, saying: ‘You are less than...’ ‘You are not equal too...’ The system of segregation itself was responsible for much of the passivity of the Negroes of Montgomery.⁴³

Here, the system of exclusion is at once a system of productive subjection.

King’s Firsthand Experience. King himself was no stranger to what this looked and felt like. Indeed, this theme appears almost immediately in the book when he recounts early memories of his father’s encounters with segregation,⁴⁴ or his own experiences as a young man growing up in the South: “As a teenager I had never been able to accept the fact of having to go to the back of the bus or sit in the segregated section of a train. The first time that I had been seated behind a curtain in a dining car, I felt as if the curtain had been dropped on my selfhood...the very idea of separation did something to my sense of dignity and self-respect.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ As he says, “Even in areas—such as voting—where they would not really be accused of tampering with the established order, the educated group had an indifference that for a period seemed incurable.” (Ibid., 22.)

⁴² Ibid., 24.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 5–6.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 7..

King knew that this “curtain” was not merely an effect of segregation, but the condition on which such a system is possible. If in Montgomery, “While there were always some who struck out against segregation, the largest number accepted it without apparent protest,” and if they seemed “resigned to segregation...[and] accepted the abuses and indignities that came with it,” King and others saw an intimate relationship between those abuses and that resignation. At very least, this is the relationship that the system aimed to produce, and if King is correct, for a time, under certain conditions and in certain fundamental ways, it was successful.

Armed with this understanding, King’s strategic response to the situation in Montgomery emerges in an early form, even before the bus boycott. Indeed, among the best examples of this foundational work are some of the new church organizations he inaugurates upon his arrival at Dexter.⁴⁶ But while exemplified in a simple and straightforward form in such early cases, once the bus boycott begins, King’s commitment to a strategy rooted in the subtleties of a series of relationships constituted in this way will take on increasingly complexity and dynamism, in response to the dialectic of power which emerge with the movement.

III. Direct Action and the Politics of Self-Purification.

Perhaps in the strategic and dialectical play of power relations, it is possible for a given party to over-reach, to miscalculate, to forget the dynamism constitutive of such relations and in so doing rest too comfortably on what it takes to be its own success, or even the belief that a

⁴⁶ With regard to voter disenfranchisement, for example, King saw that the low number of registered black voters “was in part the result of the Negroes own lack of interest or persistence in surmounting the barriers erected against them,” barriers that “were themselves formidable.” (Ibid., 16.) And so if this lack of interest is itself imminent to the structural barriers that he goes on to describe—that is, if it is both produced by the legal apparatus and in turn serves to sustain it—King’s goal is precisely to address that lack of interest through a process of training “almost every unregistered member of the [Dexter] congregation in the pitfalls of discriminatory registration procedures.” (Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 17.) Here, one doesn’t so much remove the cause of an anxiety, but rather engages in a process, a *training*, that seeks to neutralize the ability of that cause to continue producing that anxiety.

given relationship is rooted in some greater order, natural, legal, moral or otherwise. Although we cannot say for sure, perhaps this is what happened in Montgomery with the arrest of local NAACP secretary Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955. At very least, and if all that I have said thus far has been coherent, for some reason at this precise moment, perhaps in that act of over-reaching or self-forgetting on the part of the agents of the system of legal segregation, mobile and shifting but nonetheless persistent points of resistance within the African American community of Montgomery came into a kind of strategic alignment.⁴⁷ And although the idea for a boycott had already been circulating for some time in Montgomery, especially among the seasoned activists of several important organizations, there remained something unique about this constellation of factors that would give rise to the first African American mass movement, and one of the most important social movements in US history.

III.i. Origins of the Movement

Despite popular assumptions “The charismatic leader—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—did not formulate the plan for a mass boycott in Montgomery.” Its origins are rather more complex and communal: “E.D. Nixon, a longtime resident of the city, who had only a grammar school education, and members of the Women’s Political Council [WPC] led by Jo Ann Robinson, an English teacher at Alabama State College, were the ones primarily responsible for planning the boycott.”⁴⁸ Nor did the idea for the Boycott emerge spontaneously from Mrs. Parks’ refusal to

⁴⁷ See King’s remarks on Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 54., regarding the impossibility of really giving a causal account of how the movement came about.

⁴⁸ Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1984), 52. Morris goes on to further describe the central importance of the WPC in the Montgomery movement, including their support of Claudette Colvin, who had been arrested earlier the same year on March 2, 1955, for refusing to give up her seat. (See *ibid.*, 53.) For more information on the WPC and its fundamental role in the boycott, see Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987).

move and subsequent arrest, which was itself, by her own account, something with which she (and others) already had a great deal of experience. “Indeed, in the 1940s Mrs. Parks had refused several times to comply with segregation rules on buses” and had in those years already been “ejected from a bus for failing to comply.”⁴⁹ As she put it to Aldon Morris in a 1981 interview, “My resistance to being mistreated on the buses and anywhere else was just a regular thing with me and not just that day.”⁵⁰ Further still, as the adult advisor to the NAACP Youth Council from 1954-55, Parks served as a mentor to young African Americans who “took rides and sat in the front seats of segregated buses, then returned to the Youth Council to discuss their acts of defiance with Mrs. Parks.”⁵¹ Finally, Parks had also attended a series of non-violent training workshops at the famous Highlander Folks School in New Market, Tennessee in the summer of 1955, just a few months before her action on the bus.⁵²

By the time of Parks’ arrest at the end of 1955, she and Nixon had already had a working relationship dating back at least a decade: “During most of the years that Mrs. Parks worked as secretary for the NAACP, Nixon served as its president.”⁵³ It was Nixon who posted Park’s bond, and that evening sought her consent “to the use of her case to challenge the Jim Crow laws on the buses. She agreed.”⁵⁴ That same evening, Nixon, using a map of Montgomery and a slide rule, did a performed a few calculations, and “discovered that there wasn’t a single spot in Montgomery a man couldn’t walk to work if he really wanted to. I said it ain’t no reason in the world why we should lose the boycott because people couldn’t get to work.”⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 51.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 51; 298 fn 20.

⁵¹ Further still, “Mrs. Parks had scheduled an NAACP Youth Council workshop to be held on December 4, 1955, but her arrest on December 1 canceled that function.” *Ibid.*, 51-52.

⁵² See, for example, Eliot Wigginton, ed. *Refuse to Stand Silently by: An Oral History of Grass Roots Social Activism in America, 1921-64* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991), 158-70.

⁵³ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 52.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 52; 298 fn 22.

Nixon and Parks were not, however, the only people in Montgomery who were considering a boycott. On the day of Parks' arrest, the WPC was also discussing and planning such an action. This important group of professional black women had already confronted the City Commission twice in 1954 over issues related to bus segregation, and in 1955 over hiring black police and the condition of parks and playgrounds in the black community. Indeed, the WPC had already begun to plan a boycott several months prior to the Parks arrest, on the occasion of the arrest of Claudette Colvin on March 2, 1955.⁵⁶ Nixon and the WPC thus began the mobilization together, bringing in students and teachers from Alabama state, and key Montgomery ministers like E.N. French and Ralph Abernathy, who would also play a central role in the Boycott over the following year.

Four days later, on December 5th, 1955, Nixon, Abernathy, and others met to formulate the demands to present to the bus company. They also agreed to form an "organization of organizations," so as to avoid both the bureaucracy of larger organizations like the NAACP and the internal politics among local organizations. That evening, the Montgomery Improvement Association was formed, with the young Martin Luther King Jr. as its first president. Abernathy

⁵⁶ "On the evening of Mrs. Parks' arrest a bus boycott was also being discussed and planned by a group of black women who belong to the Women's Political Council (WPC). The WPC was organized by professional black women of Montgomery in 1949 for the purpose of registering black women to vote. Shortly after its inception it became a political force in Montgomery. Members of the WPC were especially prepared to play a role in organizing the bus boycott because of their previous experience. For example, in 1954 the WPC and other community groups met twice with Montgomery's City Commission and discussed the grievances of the black community regarding segregated buses. They informed the Commission that blacks were dissatisfied with standing over empty bus seats, boarding the buses by the rear door after paying fares in the front, and bus stops twice as far apart in the black community as in white neighborhoods. In response to these meetings the City Commission and representatives of the bus company acceded to the request that buses stop at every corner in the black community but refused to act on the other complaints." (ibid., 52-53.) Further, the WPC had supported fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin after she was arrested on March 2, 1955 for refusing to give up her seat to a white person on the bus. The WPC "even began formulating plans to boycott the Montgomery bus line. These plans were dropped after it was learned that Miss Colvin was expecting a child out of wedlock." (ibid., 53.)

had originally asked Nixon to serve as president, but Nixon felt that a minister “would be more appropriate” from numerous organizational standpoints.⁵⁷ King fit the bill in a number of ways.

Martin Luther King Jr. was only 25 years old when he became the minister at Dexter Avenue, and 26 when the Montgomery movement began.⁵⁸ And while his collected writings evince a lifelong interest in pacifism and nonviolence, King was not exactly versed in nonviolent traditions, nor was he yet an organizer. Indeed, it seems as though he was chosen as the figurehead and president of the newly formed Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) for at least two reasons:

First, for his clear charisma and rhetorical skills: “A few months before Mrs. Parks’ arrest, Nixon had heard King give a guest lecture for the NAACP. Nixon remembers that he was so impressed with King’s speaking abilities that he told a friend who attended the lecture, ‘I don’t know how I am going to do it but someday I am going to hang him to the stars. On December 5, 1955, I hung him there.’”⁵⁹

Second, King was also an attractive leader thanks to his youth and what Morris calls his “newcomer status.” As a newcomer, King was on no particular side among the various organizations that might be at odds with one another within the black community. Nor was he beholden white power structure, which aggressively attempted to “co-opt and control black leaders by giving them personal rewards.” Thus “the newcomer status enabled ministers to be independent of the white power structure in actuality and in the eyes of the community.”⁶⁰ In

⁵⁷ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁸ King began his pastorate at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church on September 1, 1954, and was elected President of the Montgomery Improvement Association at the founding of the organization on December 5, 1955.

⁵⁹ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 54.

⁶⁰ Morris argues that this newcomer status allowed certain individuals to take up successful leadership roles for these two primary reasons. This was true for King in Montgomery, Shuttlesworth in Birmingham, C.K. Steele in Tallahassee, and Jemison in Baton Rouge, among others. See *ibid.*, 43-44. Morris further elaborates the fortuitous set of combined factors that made King the ideal figurehead in *ibid.*, 58-63.

other words, his actual *inexperience* helped place him such a central and prominent position within the movement. As Bayard Rustin would put it much later, driving home the point about the deeply imbricated relationship between struggle and preparation:

I do not believe that one does honor to Dr. King by assuming that, somehow, he had been prepared for this job. He had not been prepared for it: either tactically, strategically, or his understanding of nonviolence. The glorious thing is that he came to a profoundly deep understanding of nonviolence through the struggle itself, and through reading and discussions which he had in the process of carrying on the protest, and not that in some way, college professors who had read Gandhi had prepared him in advance. This is just a hoax.⁶¹

But it was not just King who was inexperienced, or who would come to that deeper knowledge that Rustin mentions. Despite some crucial past organizing, not even the WPC, Parks or Nixon, nor Abernathy and the other ministers, had ever actually organized a boycott, let alone a non-violent mass movement—*no one* in the United States had. Indeed, this combination of past experience, skill, and a new set of conditions in a particular political moment could be said to characterize the birth of the Montgomery movement in general. Further still, on this general understanding, it is possible to see that even movement's inaugural action, Parks' arrest on December 1st itself, both *was* and *was not* a unique event. It was an act that she (and many others) had been arrested for numerous times before, an experience familiar enough for her to later describe it as “a regular thing.” Nor was the idea of a boycott wholly new: the example of Baton Rouge clearly loomed large, as the idea had already been proposed and attempts, albeit vaunted ones, to organize a mass action had already taken place. And yet, whether taken in terms of a strategic opening, a moment in which historical frustrations fully boiled over, or any number of other possibilities, it is clear that *something* changed in Montgomery toward the end of 1955.

⁶¹ Bayard Rustin, “Interview of Bayard Rustin by Ed Edwin, April 3, 1985,” in *The Reminiscences of Bayard Rustin, no. 4: Interview of Bayard Rustin by Ed Edwin, April 3, 1985*, ed. Ed Edwin (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2003), 138.

Thus despite the prior experience of many participants, and even the framing political events rehearsed above in the introduction, from *Brown* to Baton Rouge, Montgomery would be “the watershed of the modern civil rights movement.”⁶² And while speculation as to just *why* may ultimately be fruitless, it is clear that Parks, King, Nixon, the WPC, and others in Montgomery were experienced enough to know that in order for this moment to bear fruit, they would need to be prepared.

III.ii. Self-Purification

Once the boycott was underway, because the Klan, the law, and the segregationist white community held certain beliefs about the very nature of the black community, they marshaled their forces and tailored their “campaigns” according to that understanding, using many of the techniques of real and symbolic violence, intimidation and so on, that they had before. But if the strategic dialectic of power relations takes place in no small part on the shifting grounds of the subject, then it is within that site that key moments of combat may occur. And that preparation, including the self-purification that would take concrete form in training workshops for non-violent direct action, would require help. Above all, they would require help from experienced activists, seasoned in nonviolent struggle in ways that neither the relatively young leadership in Montgomery nor the rank and file of the movement had yet had the opportunity to undergo—though they most certainly would, and soon.

Indeed, as Morris describes it, “The Montgomery movement introduced the nonviolent approach to social change to the black masses.” Indeed, while nonviolent techniques had been practiced and developed in the US, including among African American activists, for decades,

⁶² Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 51.

nothing of the kind had ever been undertaken on this scale before: “Until this bus boycott, most blacks were unfamiliar with the techniques and principles of nonviolent direct action. The Montgomery movement served as a training ground where nonviolent direct action was systematically introduced and developed among the masses and the local leadership of the boycott.”⁶³ Both leadership and everyday citizens participating in the movement would, on this account, learn together. And they did so, at least initially, through the “Nonviolent Workshop,” which “was introduced to the civil rights movement”—at least, the phase of the movement which began at this time—in Montgomery.⁶⁴ From the very beginning of the movement, “A block of time was specifically set aside at the weekly mass meetings to train blacks in how to use nonviolence as a tool of social change.”⁶⁵ That time was nothing less than a time of self-purification, in King’s sense. But like all spiritual exercise, the Nonviolent Workshop was just that—a workshop, a space of practice, and one that did not spring fully-formed from Montgomery, but rather required both ongoing work and expert knowledge.

III.iii. Rustin, Smiley, and the Non-violent Workshop

The expertise and training that would prove central—though by no means singularly or exhaustively so—to the movement first arrived in Montgomery in the form of two individuals whose contributions, for varying reasons, have been underemphasized (at least in popular discourse around the Civil Rights Struggle): Bayard Rustin (1912-1987) and the Reverend Glenn Smiley (1910-1993), who often, at least initially, conducted the workshops.⁶⁶ Both were “experts on nonviolent protest, having received extensive training through their long affiliations with

⁶³ Ibid., 62.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ See *ibid.*

pacifist organizations”⁶⁷ perhaps above all with Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), arguably the most experienced and engaged pacifist organization in the West in the mid-20th century.⁶⁸ Rustin, whose outsized influence on the civil rights era is inversely proportional to the paltry amount of both public knowledge and scholarship available on his life and work, had in fact served as a mentor to Smiley throughout their early years at FOR. Indeed, Smiley would later describe Rustin as his “American guru,”⁶⁹ from whom, “I learned practically everything that I knew at the that time of importance about nonviolence from Bayard...I would never have had the courage to have started...without the impetus that Bayard gave me.”⁷⁰ Thus by 1956 and their respective arrivals in Montgomery, Rustin and Smiley had become “skilled colleagues who shared similar movement halfway house experiences, and both were equipped with a theoretical and practical understanding of nonviolent direct action.”⁷¹

But even despite their long personal and professional relationships, Rustin and Smiley had backgrounds and experiences diverged in sometimes striking ways. The controversial Rustin was black, gay and out from a young age, a Quaker, a former member of the Young Communist League, a close confidant of A. Philip Randolph, and a consummate organizer and practitioner of nonviolence with over a decade of experience. Rustin’s relationship with FOR was strained by

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ The history and importance of FOR cannot be told in a paragraph or footnote. For our purposes here, it is worth noting that FOR was “organized in England in 1914. In 1915 the organization became the central pacifist organization in America. Many of the great architects of nonviolent protest in the United States—among them A.J. Muste, Bayard Rustin, A. Philip Randolph, James Farmer, Glenn Smiley, and James Lawson—received training from FOR.” (ibid., 157.) From 1940 onward, A.J. Muste (1885-1967), the titan of 20th-century American pacificism, served as executive director of FOR, and for a long time as a kind of father figure to Rustin, as well as a mentor to Smiley, Farmer, and other FOR members. In April 1942, James Farmer, the then field secretary for race relations, with the support of Muste, George Houser, and Rustin, founded the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) as an outgrowth of FOR, which would become a major force within the civil rights era. (See ibid., 157-59. See also John D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 2003), 40-44; 53-55.)

⁶⁹ Glenn Smiley, *Nonviolence: The Gentle Persuader* (Nyack, NY: Fellowship Publications, 1991), Forward.

⁷⁰ D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*, 48.

⁷¹ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 159.

the time of Montgomery,⁷² as he had been forced to resign several years prior. He had, however, “previously worked with FOR for twelve years, serving first as a field secretary and later as Race Relations Secretary, and he helped FOR organize CORE. At the time he worked in Montgomery, Rustin was Executive Secretary of the War Resisters League, another movement halfway house closely associated with FOR.”⁷³ In fact, Rustin’s long experience and reputation within the movement is evinced by an anecdote from his first visit to the King household: “Coretta Scott King, who met him at the front door, recognized him instantly as a former lecturer for the Fellowship of Reconciliation; she remembered his speaking at her high school in Marion, Alabama, during the early 1940s. Waving aside the letter of introduction he was handing here...she said, ‘I know you, Mr. Rustin.’”⁷⁴

Glenn Smiley, on the other hand, was a white Methodist minister, who was at the time serving as FOR’s national field secretary. He was known for a gentler charisma than figures like King and Rustin, as well as a sense of humor comparable to his great candor.⁷⁵ Smiley also “began assisting in training Montgomery blacks in the methods of nonviolent protest action in February of 1956,”⁷⁶ and formed an enduring bond with King as well. Smiley “was to be of

⁷²A few years prior to Montgomery, Rustin had been invited by Nnamdi Azikiwe to visit Nigeria in June of 1953. In order to finance the trip, he had embarked on a six-month national speaking and fundraising tour. Following a talk to the American Association of University Women in Pasadena California on January 23, 1953, Rustin was caught by county police having sex with two white men in the back of a car. He was sentenced to 60 days—the first and only incarceration of his life that was not the result of non-violent direct action. This event caused a rupture with Muste and the FOR, his trip to Nigeria was cancelled, and Rustin was forced to resign from the organization. (D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*, 190-93.) It is worth noting that despite this break with Muste, Rustin’s other “father figure,” A. Philip Randolph, never abandoned Rustin; nor, it would turn out, did King.

⁷³ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 159.

⁷⁴ Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: The Troubles I’ve Seen, A Biography* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1997), 187. See also Stewart Burns, ed. *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 169 for more detail on Coretta Scott King’s familiarity with Rustin, and the relationship between Rustin and the King family.

⁷⁵ One need only read Smiley’s short pamphlet (one of the very rare pieces of writing he ever published), *Nonviolence: The Gentle Persuader*, to get a sense not simply of his personality, but of the way in which he skillfully deployed it in his organizing and activism, especially in racially charged encounters.

⁷⁶ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 159.

considerable assistance, especially because, in addition to his knowledge of nonviolence, he was a minister and a Southerner. He knew the language of Southerners and was comfortable in the black churches where the mass meetings were held. Moreover, blacks quickly accepted him as a man of the struggle rather than a ‘white man.’”⁷⁷ The fact that Smiley was white actually turned out to be an asset to the MIA, as it allowed him to liaise with the white community, both sympathetic and hostile, as well as gather information: “I would try to build bridges and connections with the white community in Montgomery, as well as serve as an open and above-board intelligence by which Dr. King could be kept informed about white thinking. Where possible, I would also keep watch on the White Citizens Council, and in some cases, even the Ku Klux Klan.”⁷⁸

Thus despite their differences, both Rustin and Smiley brought something unique to the table, and “their roles in the Montgomery movement were complementary.”⁷⁹ Both were older than King, lifelong pacifists steeped in both Christian and Gandhian traditions of nonviolence, and were by all accounts the most qualified individuals in the US to advise King, Abernathy, and the rest of the Montgomery movement. Along with their unparalleled collective experience, both brought a kind of creative energy to the religious and political situation on the ground. While Smiley came to Montgomery as FOR’s official representative, Rustin came at the behest of A. Philip Randolph and Lillian E. Smith,⁸⁰ and was the first northern political and organizational advisor to arrive in late February of 1956. His visit was short-lived, though his impact there and subsequent working relationship with King were both extensive and powerful.⁸¹ Despite his

⁷⁷ Ibid., 160.

⁷⁸ Smiley, *Nonviolence: The Gentle Persuader*, 5.

⁷⁹ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 159.

⁸⁰ See Rustin, “Interview of Bayard Rustin by Ed Edwin, April 3, 1985,” 134-38.

⁸¹ Indeed, following Montgomery, “For the rest of the decade, Rustin applied himself to King’s emergence as a national leader. He made himself useful in all sorts of ways. He introduced King to labor leaders...He drafted speeches and articles for King and provided line editing for King’s own writing. Rustin helped prepare *Stride*

commitment and experience, Rustin was dogged in Montgomery, as he was elsewhere, by what John D’Emilio calls “the triple jeopardy that Bayard’s identity and beliefs created—leftist, black, homosexual.”⁸²

These factors, couple with the fact that he was clearly a Northerner all contributed to curtailing his stay in Montgomery. Although “Rustin had already disclosed his ‘personal problem’ to King, who felt that the value of Rustin’s political acumen, not to mention his access to financial resources in the North, outweighed any threat his gayness or radical past posed to the boycott,” others, including some MIA members, “did not agree.”⁸³ Thus less than two weeks after arriving in Montgomery, “When a black reporter threatened to expose him as a homosexual and ex-Communist, Rustin was unceremoniously smuggled out of town in the trunk of a car.”⁸⁴ And yet, while this combination of factors led to the unfortunate brevity of Rustin’s visit to Montgomery, there is no doubt that the intimate understanding of the pain and humiliation he faced by a life on the “two crosses”⁸⁵ of being both black and queer contributed to the efficacy of his organizational abilities. The profound skill and empathy he brought to the work were the result of the very factors that drove him out of Montgomery, which were in turn what made him so good at his job, the condition of his lasting impact on the movement. Smiley, it should be noted, never wavered in his support of Rustin, neither in Montgomery nor later in life.

Toward Freedom, King’s account of the Montgomery bus boycott, offering comments on chapters and working with King’s agent and publisher to help with the book’s promotion.” Their working relationship continued for years, with Rustin playing what D’Emilio can only describe as an “indispensable” role for King across an enormous range of campaigns and issues. (D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*, 266-67.)

⁸² Ibid., 35. This “triple threat,” seems to be the ultimate source of the enormous lack of both popular and academic knowledge around his life and work. And yet, that silence and indeed confusion at his name, are almost inversely proportional to his central and even outsized role in the Civil Rights struggle from the 1930s to his death in 1987.

⁸³ Bayard Rustin, *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin* (San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press, 2003), Introduction, xxiii.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ See *ibid.*, Introduction.

Upon their respective arrivals, Rustin and Smiley got right to work in leading the nonviolent workshops and engaging in other ways. One of Rustin's first interventions in Montgomery, however, very much encapsulated the spirit of *creative* non-violence as a kind of tactical counter-conduct. It would help set the tone, both strategically and spiritually, over the course of the next year. Rustin arrived in Montgomery on Tuesday, February 21, 1956, "the day a grand jury delivered indictments against more than a hundred leaders of the protest, charging them with violating the state's laws against boycotts."⁸⁶ The threat of arrest was a classic form of both personal and economic intimidation, carrying with it all of the consequences that African Americans in the south knew to associate with it:

The indictments were meant to disrupt the boycott by stoking fear into the hearts of leaders and participants alike and by consuming the community's scarce resources of time and money. Any encounter with the white South's criminal justice system was a fearful prospect for a black man or woman; it was especially so in the heated atmosphere of the boycott. Just a few days earlier, thousands of whites had attended a mass public rally sponsored by the Citizen's Council.⁸⁷

Beyond the simple threat of arrest, the idea of putting out warrants for one hundred people at a time seems to reflect both a kind of shock and awe display of power on the part of the city, as well as an attempt at fully decapitating the movement. But it should come as little surprise that the white power structure in Montgomery held what Foucault would call a paltry understanding of power in general, and a naïve conception of the relationship of leadership to the rank and file within mass movements in particular.

King was away in Nashville when Rustin arrived, and they had not yet met in person. Rustin instead met with Nixon and Abernathy, with whom he "turned his attention to the daunting challenge of the indictments." In the spirit of creative non-violence, Rustin "proposed a

⁸⁶ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*, 228.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

classic Gandhian tactic” to the two leaders. “Rather than wait at home for the sheriff to arrive and be taken like common criminals, all of the indicted should don their Sunday best and present themselves in groups to the authorities. There was no reason to cower, Rustin told them. They should wear the indictment with pride.”⁸⁸

Rustin’s “Montgomery Diary” reports the scene at the courthouse the next morning as follows:

One hundred leaders of the protest received word that they had been indicted. Many of them did not wait for the police to come but walked to the police station and surrendered. E.D. Nixon was the first. He walked into the station and said, ‘You are looking for me? Here I am.’ This procedure had a startling effect on both the Negro and white communities. White community leaders, politicians, and police were flabbergasted. Negroes were thrilled to see their leaders surrender without being hunted down. Soon hundreds of Negroes gathered outside the police station and applauded the leaders as they entered, one by one. Later those who had been arrested were released on \$300 bail. They gathered at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church for a prayer meeting and sang for the first time a song which had been adopted that morning as the theme song for the movement. The four stanzas proclaim the essential elements of a passive struggle—protest, unity, nonviolence, and equality.⁸⁹

Much like the Klansman on that November night almost a year, the white power structure expected the threat of arrest to provoke fear, intimidation, and docility in what they took to be an inherently “cowed” community. Instead, they were met with a carnival atmosphere, which both bolstered collective dignity and faith in the mass struggle of the black community, and sent white elites back on their strategic heels. As one speaker at the February 27th mass meeting noted to the crowd:

It used to be that the white man could toe us along. The white man has discovered that Negroes are no longer afraid to go to jail. I spent Wednesday night in jail. Remember this day, the year of our lord, 1956. I stayed home all day waiting for them. They tried to finger-print me and were all thumbs. When they finished they couldn’t tell what it was. They tried to do it again and I said ‘Don’t bother, Mr., I’ll do it myself.’ We don’t mind going to jail, giving our lives. All we want is to make this contribution for you and yours.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Ibid., 229.

⁸⁹ Rustin, *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, 59.

⁹⁰ Donald Ferron, “Report on MIA Mass Meeting, February 27, 1956,” in *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, ed. Stewart Burns (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 175.

These events shifted Rustin's view of the boycott, and his plans. Indeed, "By his second day in Montgomery, Rustin was rethinking his original plan to offer formal training on Gandhian nonviolence. Opportunities to teach were occurring organically, as each new situation unfolded."⁹¹ This approach makes sense of course, not simply for the pragmatic reasons we have already seen with regard to the only seemingly preparatory activities of negotiation and collecting information, but also in principle. Unfortunately, those immediate opportunities were cut short for Rustin himself. On February 27th, just five days after the arrests, Rustin penned the last entry in his "Montgomery Diary." Following an afternoon meeting of the working committee, Rustin noted "As I watched the people walk away, I had feeling that no force on earth can stop this movement. It has all the elements to touch the hearts of men."⁹² Following his departure from Montgomery, Rustin would continue to marshal financial resources and public opinion from afar, and he and King would remain in close contact, with Rustin serving as a kind of nonviolent and strategic mentor and advisor to King for the rest of the latter's life. "During and after the boycott," as Jervis Anderson puts it, "King and Rustin formed one of the most creative alliances in the civil rights movement."⁹³

During and after Rustin's brief time in Montgomery, Smiley began and continued to hold the nonviolent workshops. However, it is precisely and unfortunately here that we encounter a historical problem which we must be clear about. The nonviolent workshops held at the beginning of the Montgomery movement are referenced throughout both the primary and secondary literature as having taken place, and as having taken place for a set amount of time

⁹¹ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*, 229.

⁹² Rustin, *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, 65.

⁹³ Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: The Troubles I've Seen, A Biography*, 189.

during each of the mass meetings.⁹⁴ However, there remains neither within that literature nor in the available archival materials much detail about the actual *content* of those workshops.⁹⁵ Neither Rustin’s “Montgomery Diary,” nor Smiley’s short and rare pamphlet, written years later, *Nonviolence: the Gentle Persuader*, provide much in the way of detail here, though we will return to these texts below. This means that although we have a strong sense of the spiritual demands faced by the movement, we do not have as much information on the forms of self-purification that initially took place through explicit training practices, as would be ideal.

What we do have, however, is an often-referenced but never analyzed text from 1941, in which Rustin provides a “Lesson Plan on Non-violent Action.”⁹⁶ Because both men were primarily active through FOR from the late 1930s up until the boycott, it is possible to revisit the models of the countless workshops given in the preceding decade and a half. Indeed, there is no indication that either Rustin or Smiley were fully reinventing the wheel in Montgomery, despite important contextual differences. As Morris puts it, “Smiley was delivering lectures he had presented hundreds of times as an FOR representative,”⁹⁷ lectures which were clearly shaped by Rustin’s direct and indirect influence, and by the same forces and resources which molded Rustin’s own approach in the first place. Moreover, the “Lesson Plan” is uncanny in its echoes of later philosophical and organizational texts across the civil rights era, including even King’s *Letter*, as we will see. In this way, we can understand something of what might have occurred in

⁹⁴ “Smiley has told of attending many of the MIA’s mass meetings after arriving in Montgomery. His responsibility was to speak fifteen minutes at the meetings, explaining the principles and techniques of nonviolence and persuading blacks that it was the method they should pursue.” (Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 160.)

⁹⁵ This includes the FOR, CORE, and Rustin documents at the Swarthmore Peace Collection, and the 26-reel microfilm collection of Rustin documents housed at Yale.

⁹⁶ Bayard Rustin, “Lesson Plan on Non-Violent Action (1941),” (Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Fellowship of Reconciliation Papers, DG 013, 1941).

⁹⁷ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 160.

Montgomery, or at very least derive a sure sense of the model practices and techniques that the Montgomery workshops were surely based on.

III.iv. The “Lesson Plan on Nonviolent Action”

There are at least two extant versions (two and four pages respectively) of Rustin’s “Lesson Plan,”⁹⁸ each divided into the same twelve sections. Part I, “Orientation,” states that “Struggle and conflict are present in all phases of life and nature. Man has largely used violence to solve his problems. Non-violent direct action is not an attempt to do away with conflict, but a technique for peacefully solving it. The real choice then is between violent and non-violent method.”⁹⁹ But it is Part II, “Motivation,” that begins to reveal consistent themes regarding the relationship of self- and collective-transformation to changes in what Rustin simply calls, in language redolent of Friedmann, “man’s environment.” Rustin elaborates: “There are two fundamental ideas on which faith in non-violent direct action is based: A.) Belief that goodwill is the most powerful and constructive force at work in human relationships. B.) Belief that progress depends on changes in man’s attitude and environment at the same time.”¹⁰⁰

In the 4-page version of the Lesson plan archived by the Denver FOR chapter, there are some additional notes which immediately follow these two points, which may be cause for some confusion. The text states:

There is power in non-cooperation with evil in bringing about the disintegration of evil. To cooperate with an evil is to help perpetuate that evil.

⁹⁸ Both versions are held in the Swarthmore Peace Collection. A 2-page version from 1941 with the subheading “compiled by Bayard Rustin,” and a 4-page version dated “[194-]” and hand labeled “Denver FOR.” The primary difference between them is font size and spacing, but the Denver lesson plan does contain a handful of lines and points that do not appear in what seems to be the earlier version.

⁹⁹ Rustin, “Lesson Plan on Non-Violent Action (1941).”

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Non-violent direct action, when used to dissolve discrimination against persons of color, involves non-cooperation with existing patterns of segregation and discrimination, and the use of active goodwill toward persons who have been practicing discrimination.

Participants in non-violent direct action know that the hope of changing unjust practices lies in changing the hearts of those who have been doing wrong.¹⁰¹

It is this last comment, on “changing the hearts of those who have been doing wrong,” that may appear somewhat confusing. That is, it may seem like the sort of naively moralistic injunction, in which systemic change (in this case, ending legal segregation) is taken to be the causal result of individual ethical transformation.¹⁰² From another point of view, it may appear as a form of what Stokely Carmichael called King’s “fallacious assumption” that “in order for nonviolence to work, your opponent has to have a conscience.”¹⁰³

However, it is interesting to note that further down, the fourth section, “Application,”¹⁰⁴ states that “This technique can be used wherever there is an area of social or economic tension, as in cases of: A.) Racial discrimination and prejudice.”¹⁰⁵ Rustin then very precisely distinguishes these two terms:

Racial discrimination is a policy, often based on business or economic reasons, or mere tradition, and something that can be broken suddenly by a change in policy. Non-violent direct action is most effectively used in breaking discrimination of this kind.

Racial prejudice is something that lies deeper within the self, and abnormal scar on the subconscious mind impressed there by unfortunate conditioning and miseducation. A racial neurosis can never be healed through coercion, but can be dissolved only through time by normal personal contacts, absolute goodwill, kindness and understanding. However, the momentary shock to an individual of the

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Indeed, any familiarity with Rustin’s work and political commitments would be justify one in wondering if this text was added by a local FOR or CORE member, as it does not appear in the other version of the Lesson Plan.

¹⁰³ Go ran Hugo Olsson et al., “The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975: A Documentary in 9 Chapters,” (Sveriges Television, MPI Media Group, 2011).

¹⁰⁴ Section III, “Aims,” States that “Those who face conflict without violence have three aims. The first is concerned with ends; the others concerned with means. A.) To achieve social, economic or political gain; B.) To behave during the struggle as to gain the respect and sympathy of the exploiters; C.) To gain, by moral integrity, the sympathy and support of third parties and observers. Note: The violent struggle, by its very nature, makes the second aim impossible. Indeed, the one aim of those who use violence is to gain benefits with little or no regard for human personality.” (Rustin, “Lesson Plan on Non-Violent Action (1941).”)

¹⁰⁵ Further down, Section IV, also lists: “B.) Labor-capital disputes; C.) Denial of civil liberties; D.) Suppression of academic freedom, etc.” (ibid.)

challenge of non-cooperation with his discriminatory policy, which may be a product of his prejudice, can be a positive initial stimulation toward his eventual change of mind.¹⁰⁶

In more contemporary terms, the former references the political, systemic, and economic forms of racial oppression, and the latter the ethical, subjective aspects of it. Rustin, counter to Carmichael's reading, points out that the purpose of non-violent non-cooperation is not to change hearts and minds, which it cannot do, even as it *may eventually* contribute to such a change. Moreover, this is not how, on Rustin's view, non-violence is actually meant to work, and that "eventual shift" is clearly not the primary strategic goal. The goal instead, and as King is also clear, is to create and foster a state of productive crisis—and not merely an "interior" or moral crisis on the part of the oppressor.¹⁰⁷

But Rustin concludes in a way that is again reminiscent of Friedmann's reciprocating formulation of the relationship of the "interior" to the "exterior," arguing that "It is a scientific fact that racial discrimination breeds prejudice, and that racial prejudice causes discrimination."¹⁰⁸ Thus, we see clearly here, that "non-cooperation" is not *only* an ethical term, but a political one as well. Moreover, we see that in this schema—as would be true in the Boycott nearly 14 years later—the two concepts cannot be distinguished, either in their social-economic operation *or* in the forms of political action taken up to end them. This view does not reduce "discrimination" to "prejudice," and thereby entails forms of direct action which target at least three axes in concert: the ethical status of members of the oppressing group, the individuals

¹⁰⁶ This passage also includes the statement that "Racial segregation is based upon the superstition of inequality, for which there is no scientific, spiritual, or moral basis." (ibid.)

¹⁰⁷ "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word 'tension.' I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth...The purpose of our direction action program is to create a situation so crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation." King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 89-90.

¹⁰⁸ Rustin, "Lesson Plan on Non-Violent Action (1941)."

taking part in direct action, and the structural “environmental” conditions which frame and inform all of these factors.

This fundamental attitude is further reflected in the two sections which follow. It is fascinating to note that this document precedes King’s 1963 *Letter* by 22 years, though its influence on the later text, whether direct or indirect, seems quite clear. This is because Section V. details what Rustin calls the “Five necessary steps preceeding [*sic.*] direct action,” which both mirror and depart from King’s four stages in important ways. The first two steps are nearly identical to King’s:

- A. Investigation – The exploited must be aware of and thoroughly examine all the factors involved and the degree to which they affect the total community.
- B. Negotiation and Arbitration – Re-examination of these same factors in light of justice and community life by all concerned in the conflict, exploited and exploiters, and the attempt peacefully to reach justice.¹⁰⁹

In some sense, the Lesson Plan is even more clear than the Letter with regard to these preparatory steps in the specification of the spiritual demands in question. Indeed, the Denver version includes further practical details regarding the practice of Investigation, specifically with regard to an exercise simply labeled “The Test:”

The Test – Steps in a typical CORE project, e.g., in a restaurant:

Purpose: To determine whether discrimination exists and, if so, to what degree it exists.

A small group, including one or two persons of color, together enter a restaurant normally with the attitude of expectancy of being served. If service is granted it is known that discrimination, if it exists at all, at least is not complete. A few days later a small Negro group preceded and followed by separate white groups is a good pattern, and finally a visit is made by one or more Negroes alone.

Participation in these projects not only affords fellowship between the participants, but also is good visual education for others in their seeing people of varied complexional colors associating naturally and in harmony.

Note: An effective technique to be used by both Whites and people of color when confronted with discrimination, is the “Why?” method. Here the victim of discrimination proceeds as though equality existed. Upon being told to move to the balcony of a theater, for example, or that he cannot be served in a given restaurant, he simply asks, “Why?” His response to the obvious answer is also, “Why?” Although finally he may be forced to accept the consequences of his position such as being arrested or being moved into a segregated area, he has raised a vital issue. One reason why racial discrimination and prejudice have

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

flourished in the North as well as in the South has been the docile acceptance by Negroes of segregation in principle. Another reason is the consequent conditioning of white people since childhood to be unaware of segregation as an issue.¹¹⁰

“The test” is however neither a kind of passive, reflective act of consideration, nor is it merely a form of “reconnaissance.” The very “investigation” is an active practice of ongoing confrontation, which gathers and confirms information *through* the cultivation of both skills and attitudes necessary for further direct action. It reflects the necessary relentlessness, the kind of untiring gadfly approach, that must be deployed again and again, consistently and often, without tiring, in all cases in which the nexus of discrimination and prejudice is encountered. Even the seemingly simple “Why method” does enormous work here: in a context wherein both oppressed *and* oppressor have been conditioned to accept and avoid questioning their circumstances, that form of relentless questioning will serve to create the kind of creative tension that King will later describe as one necessary component of large-scale change. But even such a basic exercise must itself be repeated and cultivated: if Rustin is right in his diagnosis, to simply ask “why” is as difficult for the oppressed as being asked “why” is uncomfortable for the oppressor. Indeed, that difficulty is itself among the very conditions of the ongoing maintenance of the system of legal segregation.

Rustin’s five steps continue with two more that can be seen as expansions on the previous two: “C. Education and awakening of ‘cause consciousness;’” and “D. Demonstration and Ultimatum,” which I will bracket here for want of time. The final step, however, is near to King’s “self-purification,” in ways that not only illuminate King’s later formulation, but in some sense the spirit and strategy of nonviolent direct action throughout this period:

E. Self-examination – Realization by the oppressed of their own guilt and demonstration of their willingness to make sacrifices in order to achieve their ends.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Note: Negotiation and self-examination must be established before and maintained during the entire period of conflict. Once the conflict has taken on any aspects of violence, application of these factors becomes impossible.¹¹¹

In other words, this form of nonviolent protest, on both King's account in 1963 and Rustin's in 1941, necessarily requires not simply ongoing and persistent action directed toward oppressive structures and individuals, but ongoing self-examination, and indeed self-purification, by those engaged in direct action. Neither practice, even if we are to distinguish them, can thus remain within the framework of "preparation," but must be consistently taken up and renewed at all times. This does not simply mean that one is already practicing direct action even in the preparatory phase, as we have already seen with Investigation and Negotiation. It rather means that the political struggle itself is *also*, always, an ongoing form of preparation for that very struggle.

The implications of self-examination extend further, however, as the sections of the Lesson Plan which follow reciprocally integrate the role of such forms of subjectivation within the political struggle. Section VI, "Psychological factors in non-violent direct action" states that

To achieve necessary unity for a program of direct action, the basic behavior pattern must permit the exploited to: 1. Have no fear, 2. Tell the truth, 3. Admit their guilt, 4. Behave creatively at all times in a completely non-violent manner, even in the case of physical attack, and 5. Raise the struggle from a physical to a moral plane.¹¹²

This is immediately followed by Section VII, which emphasizes the nature and role of "Discipline:"

While personal and group disciplines are essential requisites of this technique, there is not discipline for discipline's sake. On the contrary, the discipline must grow out of the demands of the actual situation. Where suffering is involved, participants in non-violent direct action try to assume it themselves rather than imposing it on the wrong-doer.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

To be clear: the discipline described here is necessarily required to fulfill *all* of the prior requirements described in each section of the Lesson Plan. But as Rustin says, this discipline is not for its own sake, but is rather cultivated in its specificity based on the conditions to which one responds and the goals that one specifies.

Further, just as in the case of ongoing self-examination, the “psychological factors” that Rustin describes here are cultivated as they are enacted. To “have no fear” under conditions which are precisely calibrated to cultivate fear; to “tell the truth” under conditions which are born in bad faith, maintained through tactics like fear and humiliation, and within which no spoken dissent may be openly brooked, under pain of violence in its varied forms; it is neither simple nor easy to act in ways that directly contravene such relations of power, and resistance is not merely conjured up from sheer force of will. “The Test” then becomes a slow, methodical practice not simply of fact-finding, but of cultivating the antithesis of fear; the apparently simple “why” method an exercise in parrhesiastic questioning, of engaging the truth when the very condition of one’s oppression is the violent obscuration of the truth itself. It can perhaps be read as a 20th century iteration of Diogenes act of standing up and walking.

It is the same in “admitting one’s guilt,” when one is, by all accounts, not exactly “guilty” of anything, certainly not of any apparent injustice. This is not moralistic self-flagellation, but a form of disciplined introspection and thus of self-purification. It is precisely such a practice which allows participants in non-violent direct action to “assume [suffering] themselves, rather than imposing it on the wrong-doer,” and to do so not *out of guilt* but rather *free of guilt*. Finally, the cultivation of what Rustin here and others elsewhere simply call *creativity* (number four above), would arguably serve as the primary attitude through which both the smaller tactics and

larger strategies of the boycott would take their most effective forms—including and perhaps above all on the level of how the boycotters would come to understand themselves.

III.v. The Sociodrama

Smiley put many of these principles into direct practice in Montgomery in the nonviolent workshops. What he calls “the most interesting one” (and the one case he really discusses in detail) actually happened after *Browder vs. Gale* was announced, in preparation for the first integrated bus rides. It occurred “at the church of the Reverend Ralph Abernathy on the occasion of a large national gathering called to look forward to the boarding of the buses integratedly on December 21 of 1956.”¹¹³ This particular workshop was probably “the most interesting” in part because it was the largest he’d ever been involved in: “It was the biggest nonviolent workshop, I guess, in history because it involved about five thousand people and people had said that you cannot hold a workshop with five thousand people.” Morris adds that “They did; in fact, they were held on four consecutive days before the buses were desegregated in Montgomery.”¹¹⁴ Smiley reports that “notable among the many activities was the erection of a simulated bus in the place where the pulpit would normally be,” which served as the setting for a practice of “sociodrama,” in which participants would “‘get on the bus’ to represent various problems they would face on bus-riding day,”¹¹⁵ specifically through inevitable encounters with resistant white drivers and riders, though perhaps not exclusively.

This practice of “sociodrama” was for Smiley “nothing new, as it has been used in one form or another in many teaching situations,”¹¹⁶ and it very much exercised the principles and

¹¹³ Smiley, *Nonviolence: The Gentle Persuader*, 17.

¹¹⁴ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 161.

¹¹⁵ Smiley, *Nonviolence: The Gentle Persuader*, 17.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

techniques seen in the “Lesson Plan.” Smiley explains that all of the characters “had to be played by black actors, as there were only about five white people in the audience, all of them observers from the north.”¹¹⁷ He continues:

A black minister played the part of the white driver, and other members of the movement had the unique experience of trying to understand how a white person felt as they acted out their version of the problem; that is part of the value of the device.

One was a white woman sitting alone in a seat for two, having said that she ‘would never sit by one of them.’ Another...was a woman who kept saying ‘Now come on back here where you belong, honey, and don’t cause us no trouble.’

Then I asked a volunteer to get on the bus and try to solve the problem of the white woman sitting in the seat for two. She boarded the bus, pretended to deposit her dime in the till, and approached the seat, whereupon the ‘white’ woman put her package in the seat to try to prevent the occupation. This surprise move confounded the bus boarder for a moment and I asked, ‘Now, what if she won’t remove it for you?’ ‘Then I would pick it up and throw it on the floor,’ she said.

There were shouts of ‘No’ from the audience, so I asked the attorney, Mr. Gray, to speak to the problem. He explained how the woman had no legal right to the seat and could not take the seat as her own just by putting a small package on it. Nevertheless, in the present circumstances, if the bus boarder touched the package, she might well be arrested and charged with theft, and many nodded their heads in agreement, having had embarrassing experiences with white people in homes where they had worked.

Another woman got on the bus when the first had withdrawn. She looked at the package, then said in a friendly tone, ‘May I carry your package for you while we ride along together?’ The woman refused to accept her presence and just looked out the window. A third woman said this: ‘I like the idea of asking the woman if I could carry her package and, since she didn’t yield, I would get as close to the seat as I could, bow my head and pray silently that God would bless me and the white woman, and help us both to realize that all we wanted was to get this awful load off our feet.’ At that, there was a chorus of ‘amens,’ for no one could think of anything better to get at the woman’s conscience.

And so we went through the problems that had been outlined.¹¹⁸

Smiley led this exercise again and again for the next four days, including a session of the same workshop with seventy sympathetic white Montgomery residents.¹¹⁹ He emphasizes even

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 17-18.

¹¹⁹ In fact, Smiley’s work in this direction was even more thorough: “Two days before Montgomery desegregated its buses, Smiley met with seventy sympathetic whites and conducted the same nonviolent workshops with them that had been held at the mass meetings. As those whites were trained to help integrate buses nonviolently, proof was provided to other whites that peaceful integration was possible.” (Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 161-62.) An analysis of this practice among sympathetic whites would be fascinating in terms of understanding the role of political subjectivation within members of an *oppressive* group, though such work must be bracketed within the current project for want of space. For further details about Smiley’s time in Montgomery, and its place within FOR, see Glenn Smiley, “Memo to [FOR] Staff, April 7, 1956,” in *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, ed. Stewart Burns (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). See also Smiley’s “Letter to Dr. Martin Luther King, April 13, 1956.”

at this late stage of the boycott, after the Supreme Court victory, the forms of discipline that would be required still needed ongoing cultivation. King corroborates this in *Stride Toward Freedom*, noting that “Sometimes the person playing a white man put so much zeal into his performance that he had to be gently reprovved from the sidelines. Often a Negro forgot his nonviolent role and struck back with vigor; whenever this happened, we worked to re-channel his words and deeds in a nonviolent direction.”¹²⁰

It is hard not to see an affinity here between the core aims of the sociodrama and the heart of Stoic practices of anticipation, for example. In both cases, one imagines a likely future in terms of both the evils that one will face, and the passions that will shape one’s reaction to those circumstances. It is through practice that one first identifies, then learns to creatively adapt oneself in order to adapt—in a way that is both politically efficacious and ethically resonant—to the conditions one will face. At the same time, this is a practice of anticipation, meditation, and self-examination that the Stoics could never have imagined, either in its content, its reasons for being, technological conditions, or teleological ends.

The affinities and differences are further refracted back through the principles and tactics outlined in Rustin’s “Lesson Plan” and King’s *Letter*. This practice of anticipation is also a practice of self-examination. And in turn, the self-examination that one undergoes on the stage, here with the help of a sympathetic audience of comrades and fellow members of a politically oppressed group, is also a form of self-purification. Indeed, with the help of the other participants, even, or perhaps especially, in the form of shouts from the audience, one can come

¹²⁰ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 156. Note that a similar, though briefer and much more informal exercise was conducted by King in a kind of question-and-answer format at an earlier mass meeting in October. See Robert L. Cannon, “Letter to Alfred Hassler and Glenn E. Smiley, October 3, 1956,” in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Volume III: Birth of a New Age, December 1955-December 1956*, ed. Clayborne Carson (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 389-90.

to see and “admit one’s own guilt,” in terms of the kinds of anger or impulses to violence that do not correlate with the nonviolent *telos* of the exercise. In this way, it is also the purification of a community of political subjects, wherein that which must be purified is tied to conditions of political subjection through historically unique technological conditions around mass transit. Indeed, the wholly modern intersection of “race” itself and the physical machinery of city buses produce subjective conditions which must be addressed by forms of discipline that, as Rustin says, “grow out of the demands of the actual situation,”¹²¹ in all of its specificity and detail.

The sociodrama also reinforces the point, central to the Lesson Plan, that the work of preparation for direct action, indeed of self-purification, is also an ongoing process, always present and always necessary throughout the duration of the political engagement. Indeed, even at such a late stage in the boycott, there was still work to be done, the kind of work on oneself, and indeed on the community, that seeks to undo sustained forms of subjection, and which cannot happen overnight. As Smiley says,

If segregation had been stopped in Montgomery after a couple of weeks of boycott, we would probably have never heard of the protest again, except perhaps for a footnote in history. The fact that it took 381 days of walking, of inconvenience, of being jailed. And the expenditure of mountains of energy and money gave nonviolence time to mature and to be refined into a marvelously effective illustration of the power of love and nonviolence to achieve some historic changes in America.¹²²

Or as Morris puts it, “It took time to create the nonviolent protestor.”¹²³

But if all agree that “It was a difficult task requiring intense preparation,” both the Lesson Plan and Smiley’s sociodrama demonstrate that, to use King’s language, the lines between self-purification and direct action “itself” are much more blurred. Rather than a kind of two-stage program, preparatory exercises and sustained direct action are better understood as aspects of a

¹²¹ Rustin, “Lesson Plan on Non-Violent Action (1941).”

¹²² Smiley, *Nonviolence: The Gentle Persuader*, 16.

¹²³ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 161.

more general practice. The distinction between the two is an analytic one, not a practical or even historic one; their relationship is not causal, but again dialectical. Even the stages of fact-finding and negotiation continued up to the very end of the boycott, as exercises that one could not let up, even for a moment.¹²⁴ This is because, as the pacifist Lillian Smith so eloquently said in a letter to King, “You can’t be an expert in nonviolence; it is like being a saint or an artist; each person grows his own skill and expertness.”¹²⁵

One cannot be an expert, in other words, because that growth has no endpoint; nonviolence, on this view, is a way of life and a form of perfectionism, rather than a status is which is achieved after sufficient work. It is for this reason that the ongoing cultivation of necessary self-discipline, examination, and purification began the moment the idea of a boycott emerged. And as these documents show, it is for this same reason that these forms of discipline characterized the very act of boycotting the buses, above all in the daily pilgrimage to work.

III.vi. The Pilgrimage to Work.

Through the help of figures like Smiley and Rustin, organizations like FOR and CORE brought a great deal of experience and expertise to Montgomery, to be sure. In the same way, seasoned local activists and organizers like Nixon, Parks, and the WPC, as well as new leaders like King and Abernathy, contributed equally crucial efforts to the organization of the boycott. Indeed, even A. Philip Randolph “indicated that the Montgomery leaders had managed thus far

¹²⁴ In fact, Smiley’s work in this direction was even more thorough: “Two days before Montgomery desegregated its buses, Smiley met with seventy sympathetic whites and conducted the same nonviolent workshops with them that had been held at the mass meetings. As those whites were trained to help integrate buses nonviolently, proof was provided to other whites that peaceful integration was possible.” (ibid., 161-62.) For further details about Smiley’s time in Montgomery, and its place within FOR, see Smiley, “Memo to [FOR] Staff, April 7, 1956.”

¹²⁵ Lillian Smith, “Letter to Dr. Martin Luther King, March 10, 1956,” ibid., 203.

[*more*] successfully than ‘any of our so-called non-violence experts’ a mass resistance campaign and we should learn from them rather than assume that we know it all.”¹²⁶

And yet, it was the city of Montgomery and the movement as a whole which would arguably do the most teaching. This is in no small part because “Until the Montgomery movement nonviolent protest methods had never been used in America on a mass scale by any of the pacifist organizations, including FOR.”¹²⁷ Montgomery was a historically unique collective effort, sustained by a fully committed rank and file. Thus when Abernathy addressed the February 27th mass meeting at Holt Street Baptist, he reminded the crowd “This is your movement; we don’t have any leaders in the movement; you are the leaders. Someone asked me yesterday— ‘Who are the leaders?’” Before he could answer, “the congregation answered for him, saying at one time— ‘We are;’ or ‘There ain’t no leaders,’ etc.”¹²⁸ This was no mere rhetorical flourish, but a fact which was among the conditions of the movement’s immediate success and influence.

In a memo to King following the end of the Boycott, Rustin identifies several features of the Montgomery movement “which are not found in other movements or efforts:”

It was organized; used existing institutions as foundations so that all social strata of the community were involved. It thus had the strength of unity which the school integration efforts have lacked, thereby leaving the fight to heroic but isolated individuals. Montgomery could plan tactics, seek advice and support, develop financial resources and encompass a whole community in a crusade dominating all other issues. The reason there were those who did not want to give up the boycott is due in part to the consciousness that this welding of a comprehensive, unified group had a quality not to be lost. The fellowship, the ideals, the joy of sacrifice for others and other varied features of the movement have given people something to belong to...¹²⁹

¹²⁶ John M. Swomley, “Letter to Glenn Smiley, February 29, 1956,” *ibid.*, 172.

¹²⁷ Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 158-59.

¹²⁸ Ferron, “Report on MIA Mass Meeting, February 27, 1956,” 174.

¹²⁹ Bayard Rustin, “Rustin to King: Memo on the Montgomery Bus Boycott, December 23, 1956,” *ibid.*, 329; *ibid.* We can put aside for the moment Rustin’s claim about the top-down nature of the school desegregation campaign; in either case, the view rehearsed here certainly reflects popular conceptions of both movements.

Thus, he continues, “Montgomery was unique in that it relied upon the active participation of people who had a *daily* task of action and dedication. The movement did not rely exclusively on a handful of leaders to carry through such fundamental change.”¹³⁰

The Montgomery community accomplished these changes in various ways: through practices by which the strategic balance was significantly altered, and a new set of rules constituted. To detail all of those actions and ongoing activities would be a task in its own right. The point is simply that the white power structure in the city continued to operate according to standard white 20th century racial assumptions regarding the “nature” of black people, as well as historical assumptions regarding the tactical efficacy of intimidation, humiliation, and anti-solidaristic appeals to individual wellbeing over the collective good of the people. A series of implicit and explicit understandings of who African Americans were and how they would respond to certain measures determined the actions taken by the police, Citizens Councils, and politicians. This is why it was not just the *fact* of “daily action and dedication” in general on the part of the boycotters, but rather the precise forms of that action which made all the difference. In this case and others like it, to create an *other world*, through the concrete first step of desegregation, one must oneself *be other*. And if the world one wishes to alter or abandon functions through an economy of violence (physical, legal, symbolic, etc.) and its attending fear, then one must, through strategic means parallel and responsive but by no means equivalent, work toward rendering neutral precisely those methods of violence and sources of fear.

It is for this reason that we may take the simple practice of walking to work rather than riding the bus as representative of the forms of collective spiritual-political exercise most characteristic of the movement. It is the best example here of just what I mean by a strategic

¹³⁰ Ibid., 330.

response that is responsively parallel but not formally equivalent. It is no accident that it was the simple act of walking that demonstrated to King that “The once dormant and quiescent Negro community was now fully awake.”¹³¹ Further, because it was sustained by many participants for the better part of a year or more, it is also the practice that best embodies the ongoing, dialectical, and perfectionist telos of the movement. Finally, the walk to work was a practice born of political circumstances that brought about clear changes among practicing subjects, “on the level of the self and of being,” in ways that produced the most clear and direct tactical results with regard to the political and economic “environment,” to use King’s term.

At a special meeting of the MIA executive board on January 30th, 1956—the very day that King’s home was bombed—he and the other ministers had met to discuss the strange incident of several ministers unaffiliated with the MIA who had met with city officials and agreed to a “compromise” that would end the boycott. It is clear from the minutes of the meeting however that it was the commitment of the rank and file that would keep the boycott going, rather than instruction from the leadership. Some of the latter were, at least at this juncture, amenable to entertaining a “compromise,” (though one that Nixon and others quickly pointed out was no compromise at all). At the meeting, King reports “I’ve seen along the way where some of the ministers are getting weary...If you have that impression (that N. should go back under the same conditions to the buses), we won’t ostracize you. We should iron it out here (exec. Meetings) and show wherein we shouldn’t go back.”¹³²

It was clear to several people at the meeting, however, that those walking to work would simply not accept any concessions short of victory. Indeed, it had been raining heavily that morning, a difficulty which only demonstrated the already robust commitment of the boycotters

¹³¹ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 42.

¹³² Ferron, “Report on MIA Executive Board ‘Call’ Meeting, January 30, 1956,” 129.

regardless of—or perhaps in part thanks to—any personal hardship. As one member put it, “‘This morning was the test.’ The rain was pouring and ‘they still walked.’ ‘If they don’t want to go back, I don’t see why we should decide otherwise. Folk just made too much sacrifice. I hold that we should go on to the end. I think we should stay just where we’re at.’”¹³³ It is for this reason, because of this commitment, that no compromise would be made in January. The executive board new that the rank and file would simply not allow it. As King put it:

From my limited contact, if we went tonight and asked the people to get back on the buses, we would be ostracized. They wouldn’t get back. We shouldn’t give people the illusion that there are no sacrifices involved, that it could be ended soon. My intimidations¹³⁴ are a small price to pay if victory can be won. We should make the illusion that they won’t have to walk. I believe to the bottom of my heart that the majority of Negroes would ostracize us. They are willing to walk.¹³⁵

Nixon put it much more concisely: “if we accept it, we are going to ‘run into trouble’ with the people who had been riding the bus. ‘If that’s what you’re going to do, I don’t want to be here when you tell the people.’”¹³⁶

No compromise was sought or accepted. However, the boycott did not simply persist, it became a way of life, and did so rather quickly. At the February 27th mass meeting, one speaker reflected the collective experience thus far: “For the past 84 days many of us have sacrificed, suffered, and been put in jail. In spite of our previous experiences, the fact remains, the end is not here yet. The novelty has worn away, and we’re down to the deep roots of the situation we find ourselves in. We’ve emptied ourselves of pent-up emotions. Something will fill that vacuum—

¹³³ Ibid., 128-29. Note that Ferron, the Fisk researcher who recorded the meeting, attributes this statement to a “Mr. White,” though there is no further information in this document or the collection which contains it about this individual.

¹³⁴ King’s statement here about being intimidated is unfortunately prescient, as this meeting took place from 11 am to 2:35pm on the 30th, and the bomb was detonated on his front porch at around 9:15 that evening.

¹³⁵ Ferron, “Report on MIA Executive Board ‘Call’ Meeting, January 30, 1956,” 129.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 128.

what it is remains up to you.”¹³⁷ Something had clearly changed by February, but it had begun months earlier. As Joann Robinson put it, “After December 5, 1955, the people were able to release their suppressed emotions through the boycott movement, which allowed them to retaliate directly for the pain, humiliation, and embarrassment that they had endured over the years at the hands of drivers and policemen while riding on the buses.”¹³⁸ The practices of walking and organizing thus allowed participants an ongoing form of precisely what King calls self-purification. To empty oneself of pent-up emotions, and to “retaliate directly” to the system of legal segregation through direct action, were not simply byproducts of the boycott. Instead, they were the reciprocating conditions *and* effects of its success. One had to “empty oneself” in order to engage effectively in the various actions that constituted the boycott, but those actions, like walking, or even driving others, constituted some of those practices of self-purification.

King, Abernathy, and others saw this connection directly. As King said in his remarks to the March 1st Mass Meeting:

God is using Montgomery as a proving ground. He will cause democratic conditions to stand where they should stand. We have now new dignity and awareness. We are God’s children. We’re walking because we’re tired of being suppressed politically. We’re walking because we’re tired of being suppressed economically. We’re walking because we’re tired of having [*been*] segregated and discriminated. Freedom is the just claim of all men. As we walk we’re going to walk with love in our hearts. Somebody has to have sense enough to cut off the hate. The power of love is very strong; love your enemies. The whole armor of God is the weapon of love and the breastplate of righteousness. There is something about love that transforms; we’re going to keep on in the same spirit.¹³⁹

Abernathy’s announcements to the crowd that same evening reflect a similar understanding:

Are you tired? [*Response:*] “No-o-o!” Are you weary? R. “No-o-o!” Do you feel like turning around? R. “No-o-o!” Are you still with the movement? R. “Yes-s-s-s-s!” “If all the cars break down and go to the garage, what are you going to do? R. “Walk!” Are you still praying? R. “Yes-s-s-s!” We must keep God at

¹³⁷ Ferron, “Report on MIA Mass Meeting, February 27, 1956,” 175.

¹³⁸ Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, 37.

¹³⁹ Ferron, “Report on MIA Mass Meeting, March 1, 1956,” 197.

the forefront. It takes strength to walk to and from work, and only God can give us that strength. We aren't going to leave Montgomery, we're going to enjoy freedom right here in Montgomery.¹⁴⁰

And as Abernathy put again a month later:

I have taken on new courage. I am not tired. I have taken on new strength. Are you tired? I want to hear you say. I want to hear you say loud so Mayor Gayle can hear you. Are you tired? (No, no no, from audience). Let me hear you again. I like to hear you good and loud. Are you tired? (Thunderous 'NO' in response).

It's been rough so far, but not as rough as it's going to get. We must be ready to go all the way and it will get rougher. We don't know how the transportation will hold up. Are you going back if anything happens on the way? ('NO, NO, Gone too far') We may have to walk. ('WE'LL WALK') We may have to walk and walk 'til we can't walk anymore. If we can't walk, we'll crawl.¹⁴¹

Walking, in this case, was not simply symbolic, that much seems clear. But it was not simply an act of economic resistance either. It was instead a practice of self-purification in which ethical transformation was tied directly to political transformation. It was not just a show of what Abernathy calls strength, but was also very clearly one of the primary ways in which that necessary strength was cultivated.

Indeed, from the first day of the boycott, but on many others to come as well, the pilgrimage to and from work would demonstrate to King that in this practice a change was taking place: "They knew why they walked, and the knowledge was evident in the way they carried themselves. And as I watched them I knew that there is nothing more majestic than the determined courage of individuals willing to suffer and sacrifice for their freedom and dignity."¹⁴² Indeed, "so profoundly had the spirit of the protest become a part of the people's lives that sometimes they even preferred to walk when a ride was available. The act of walking, for many had become of symbolic importance."¹⁴³ This fact is perhaps best evinced by the often-

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 198.

¹⁴¹ Anna Holden, "Report on MIA Mass Meeting, March 22, 1956," *ibid.*, 218.

¹⁴² King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 42.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 63-64.

repeated story of “an elderly seventy-year-old lady known affectionately as ‘Sister Pollard.’”¹⁴⁴ A carpool driver stopped beside her as she was “trudging along with obvious difficulty. ‘Jump in, grandmother,’ he said. ‘You don’t need to walk.’” However, “She waved him on. ‘I’m not walking for myself,’ she explained. ‘I’m walking for my children and grandchildren.’”¹⁴⁵ The driver reportedly responded by asking, “But aren’t your feet tired?” to which she famously replied, in a way that for King “summed up [the essence of the Montgomery movement] for the rest... ‘My feet is tired, but my soul is at rest.’”¹⁴⁶

It was precisely the production of *weary souls* by the system of legal segregation, a weariness which then in turn served to sustain it, that the overarching strategy had to target. One had to trade a weary soul for weary feet, and many in the white community believed, strangely in retrospect, that the physical burden would prove harder to bear than the spiritual one with which people had been living, and that the boycott would fail. But like the discipline required to sustain them, rested souls and weary feet must also be cultivated, and there were certainly times in which it seemed to some like the latter would win out over the former. This proved radically incorrect, but its absurdity in retrospect must not cover over the fact of just how obvious it must

¹⁴⁴ Robert J. Walker, *Let My People Go! The Miracle of the Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Lanham, MA: Hamilton Books, 2007), 196.

¹⁴⁵ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 63-64.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xxx. There are several recorded versions of this event, slightly different in detail, but generally identical. See also Walker, *Let My People Go! The Miracle of the Montgomery Bus Boycott*, 196, for a slightly more detailed account of this event. Joann Robinson also recounts what appears to be the same anecdote, as follows: “Yet another woman ‘who had walked halfway across town’ was given a ride by a minister who asked if she was tired. She replied, ‘Well, my body may be a bit tired, but for many years now my soul has been tired. Now my soul is resting. So I don’t mind if my body is tired, because my soul is free.’” (Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, 60.) Robinson also reports another event, perhaps apocryphal, but more comical than the story of Sister Pollard, though similar with regard to the changes that had come about through the practice of the boycott: “One December day a very aged black woman, who was struggling along on foot, walking with a cane, was overtaken by a bus with a lone black rider on it. The bus stopped at the stop sign just ahead of the old woman, to let the black passenger out. Seeing the situation, the crippled woman hobbling along faster toward the bus. The driver, thinking that the woman was hurrying to get on, seized the opportunity to show how courteous he could be to black people if they would only ride again. So he called out, in a very friendly tone, ‘Don’t hurt yourself, auntie, I’ll wait for you!’ With anger and scorn, the old woman pantingly, gaspingly called up to him as she hurried past the open bus door, ‘I’m not your auntie, and I don’t want to get on your bus. I’m trying to catch the ***** who just got off!’ Then she drew back her cane to strike the rider as he fled beyond her reach.” (*ibid.*, 99.)

have seemed from a vantage point *within* a relationship of power for which weary souls were the very condition, and which for that reason must have come to appear self-evident. But although that apparatus was complex, made up of far more and more insidious components than a series of laws, it still operated through means clear enough and identifiable enough to make crucial forms of response and resistance possible.

The movement as a whole was incredibly complex to be sure, addressing the question of legal segregation on numerous levels and with an entire array of methods, some of which have not been discussed here so as to focus on those means which are rarely discussed anyway. However, even within such a dynamic and multivalent movement of resistance, simply to *walk*, to do so far enough, long enough, and with a certain kind of determination, could, and did, produce the kind of deep and sustainable dignity King new to be the condition for the neutralization of the fear and violence that had been the pillars and hallmarks of the system. As Robinson reports, even early on in the movement, the work of the boycott caused people to “[feel] reborn, important for the first time....Many were themselves surprised at the response of the masses, and could not explain, if they had wanted to, what had changed them overnight into fearless, courageous, proud people, standing together for human dignity, civil rights, and, yes, self-respect! [...] They were really free—free inside! They felt it! Acted it! Manifested it in their entire beings!”¹⁴⁷

In this way, we can see, hopefully, that it was not the Supreme court decision of November 13th, 1956 that altered the community’s relationship to its own fear that evening in November with which we began. Rather, that legal victory *and* that courageously indifferent response to a well-known threat were themselves rooted in a new dignity, of which the simple

¹⁴⁷ Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, 61.

act of walking to and from work constituted such a crucial element. It is for this reason that King was able to argue, in his contribution to a 1956 special edition of “Liberation” magazine, that the problem of racism, institutional or otherwise, cannot be solved by politics alone:

Discussion has tended to concentrate on such aspects as Supreme Court decisions and the maintenance of law and order against mob rule. We do not wish to minimize these issues. They have an important bearing on the peace of our land. But the racial problem, North and South, cannot be solved on a purely political level. It must be approached morally and spiritually. We must ask ourselves as individuals: What is the right thing to do, regardless of the personal sacrifices involved?¹⁴⁸

If all that I have argued both in this chapter and over the course of this larger project has been coherent, then it should be clear that King’s claim here is not the moralistic one that it may seem on a surface reading. Rather, it is a reflection of King’s understanding of the deep and necessary “material connection between man and his environment,” including a reciprocating relationship between the material conditions of the environment and the ethical status of the individual.

Like Friedmann and indeed Foucault, for King, there is an irreducible relationship between material conditions and who one is. Thus, in a mass movement like Montgomery, an “interior” shift in practicing subjects is necessary to disrupt and alter those environmental conditions, which have effects in turn on those ethical subjects, and so on, in turn, without any special priority granted to either of these domains.

IV. Conclusions.

There is a moment during the first meeting of the newly formed Montgomery Improvement Association (on the day of Rosa Park’s trial and the first day of the boycott),

¹⁴⁸ King, “We Are Still Walking,” 321.

during which what can only be called the parrhesiastic intervention of one individual prevents the group from sinking back into the very economy of power that the community is trying to escape. King describes the following event, which took place just after the name for the new organization was chosen:

Several people, not wanting the reporters to know our future moves, suggested that we just sing and pray; if there were specific recommendations to be made to the people, these could be mimeographed and passed out secretly during the meeting. This, they felt, would leave the reporters in the dark. Others urged that something should be done to conceal the true identity of the leaders, feeling that if no particular name was revealed it would be safer for all involved.¹⁴⁹

But, schematically put, it may be argued that in urging secrecy, these community members were, subconsciously to be sure, still beholden to the dynamic of fear by which the system of segregation had in part operated.

E.D. Nixon was well aware of this, and as King reports, “After a rather lengthy discussion, [Nixon] rose impatiently”¹⁵⁰ not simply to address the meeting, but to speak a necessary truth with a characteristic courage. And when he says, “We are acting like little boys,” we cannot forget the longstanding and insidious tradition of whites referring to African American adults precisely as children, a practice with which King reports his father taking such issue at the beginning of the book.¹⁵¹ Nixon continues to draw out the courage of the group by directly addressing what he sees as its absence:

‘Somebody’s name will have to be known, and if we are afraid we might just as well fold up right now. We must also be men enough to discuss our recommendations in the open; this idea of secretly passing something around on paper is a lot of bunk. The white folks are eventually going to find out anyway. We’d better decide now if we are going to be fearless men or scared boys.’

¹⁴⁹ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 45.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ See *ibid.*, 6.

With this forthright statement the air was cleared. Nobody would again suggest that we try to conceal our identity or avoid facing the issue head on. Nixon's courageous affirmation had given new heart to those who were about to be crippled by fear.¹⁵²

If one of the goals is to no longer be afraid in general, then a collective practice of bravery, inaugurated by Nixon's parrhesia, would begin the work of countering one of the key features by which the system of segregation functioned. In fact, this same point is also central, for King at least, to the question of violence and its potential use by the African American community.

As the movement progressed, King and others would continue to stress the vision, and strategy, of nonviolence, and "From the beginning the people responded to this philosophy with amazing ardor."¹⁵³ But perhaps because the reasons for this course of action were so fundamental, from time to time some individual or group would lose sight of them:

To be sure, there were some who were slow to concur. Occasionally members of the executive board would say to me in private that we needed a more militant approach. They looked upon nonviolence as weak and uncompromising. Others felt that at least a modicum of violence would convince the white people that the Negroes meant business and were not afraid. A member of my church came to me one day and solemnly suggested that it would be to our advantage to 'kill off' eight or ten white people. 'This is the only language these white folks understand,' he said. 'If we fail to do this they will think we're afraid. We must show them we're not afraid any longer.'¹⁵⁴

It is clear that King is in fact in agreement with this last sentiment regarding fear. But it is perhaps the unnamed interlocutor who does not necessarily grasp the full extent of the precise role that the kinds of real and symbolic violence that he is invoking have played in maintaining the system of segregation. That is, in making these kinds of arguments, he (or she) is

¹⁵² Ibid., 46.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 74.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 74-75.

still living entirely within the economy of power that the movement sought most fundamentally to undo.

King had learned that if those sorts of dynamics were to be abandoned, the strategies deployed in doing so would have to meet the forces arrayed against the black community in ways that were parallel though asymmetrical. The strategic counter to a given tactic is always tailored by that tactic, but in cases like this, a response in kind may for these reasons be anything from simply inefficacious to potentially futile.

On this reading, the logic of power and resistance, conduct and counter-conduct, would be the only way out of the situation. In King's words, "the use of violence in our struggle would be both impractical and immoral" for all of the reasons we have been discussing here. "To meet hate with retaliatory hate would do nothing but intensify the existence of evil in the universe. Hate begets hate; violence begets violence; toughness begets a greater toughness. We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love; we must meet physical force with soul force."¹⁵⁵

Thus if King's interlocutor here was indeed correct that violence was the only language by which the system of segregation and the racism that undergirded could communicate, then to respond violently would be to continue to play precisely by the rules of that game and that system. It would be in some sense just the sort of response the system would expect, given its understanding both of itself and of the black community (recall the claim by the white press that 'goon squads' were enforcing the boycott, among other things). To respond in that way would be to demonstrate that the black community is made up not just of the people that the system takes them to be, but the people that that system *wants* them to be. To play by the rules that the system

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

itself has constituted, to speak the language of fear and violence, is to at very least cede it the advantage, and to at most ensure its ultimate victory.

In fact, King speaks explicitly of the “miscalculation of the white leaders” in precisely these terms. The latter continued to operate not simply according to the tactics they had always deployed, but out of a fundamental misunderstanding of *who* the black community in Montgomery was, or at very least was becoming. Thus, as King and Rustin say together in an early piece for *Liberation*: “Because the mayor and city authorities cannot admit to themselves that we have changed, every move they have made has inadvertently increased the protest and united the Negro community.”¹⁵⁶ King and Rustin then go on to list fourteen separate attempts at intimidation and coercion on the part of the white power structure in Montgomery to intimidate and harass African Americans to abandon the boycott between December 1, 1955 and February 22, 1956. Each item in the list notes exactly how each tactic backfired and further aided the boycott: from printing the call to boycott on the front page of the newspaper, to bombing the homes of King, Nixon, and others:

Every attempt to end the protest by intimidation, by encouraging Negroes to inform, by force and violence, further cemented the Negro community and brought sympathy for our cause from men of good will all over the world. The great appeal for the world seems to lie in the fact that we in Montgomery have adopted the method of non-violence. In a world in which most men attempt to defend their highest values by the accumulation of weapons of destruction, it is morally refreshing to hear 5,000 Negroes in Montgomery shout “Amen” and “Halleluh” when they are exhorted to ‘pray for those who oppose you, or pray ‘Oh Lord, give us strength of body to keep walking for freedom,’ and conclude each mass meeting with: ‘Let us pray that God shall give us strength to remain non-violent though we may face death.’¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Martin Luther King and Bayard Rustin, “Our Struggle,” in *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, ed. Stewart Burns (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 246. This text was in fact ghost-written by Rustin for King, who “slightly revised Rustin’s draft article on the bus boycott for publication in the second issue of *Liberation*. It was the first of numerous articles and chapter drafts that Rustin wrote for him.” (Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, 243.)

¹⁵⁷ King and Rustin, “Our Struggle,” 247.

Conversely, in numerous interviews undertaken by various social scientists who came to Montgomery during the protest, the refrain from both white politicians and unsympathetic citizens, consistently makes use of arguments about black “character” to explain recent events and predict the ultimate downfall of the boycott. The language used by one of bus drivers interviewed by Anna Holden in January of 1956 is representative:

There are two things about Nigras, First, they don't trust each other—none of 'em—and they'll be fighting pretty soon...And the second thing about Nigras, they love their cars. They take good care of them and they're proud of them. You notice how they keep their cars shined and polished? Well, they won't keep this up when their cars begin to depreciate. They're running their own cars like taxis now and not getting anything for it and when their cars begin to get worn, they'll quit.¹⁵⁸

Similarly, in a February interview not long after this one, a Montgomery cab driver gave Holden his own take on “the thing about n*****.” In his reported view, “Lady...they don't have nothing theirselves, but they pay their preachers and they pay their lodge dues. If they don't do nothing else, they pay their dues so the bigshots can put on a good show. That's what they're doing right now—these poor folks that are walking are paying for the big shots to ride.”¹⁵⁹

The point then, for the bus driver—who in fact goes on to describe his sympathy for the boycotters and belief in the gradual increase in rights for African Americans—is that the political rights that the Montgomery community was fighting for simply could not overcome the fundamental character flaws of “not trusting one another,” and “loving their cars.” And for the cab driver, who reiterates a particularly virulent piece of segregationist boilerplate from this period, “big shots” were manipulating the otherwise docile and happy black community. Another interviewee, a “prominent attorney” serving as general counsel for the Central Alabama White Citizens council, explained to Holden that “it was started by NAACP agitators. Ninety-five

¹⁵⁸ Holden, “Interview with Bus Drivers, January 21, 1956,” 178.

¹⁵⁹ “Interview with a Cab Driver, February 6, 1956,” 145.

percent of the Nigras here were happy with things the way they were and are now the victims of their exploitation—they didn't want this. NAACP leadership forced it on them.”¹⁶⁰

Implicit in all these claims are again the same assumptions about black people, claims that seem to have been so naturalized as to become second nature for their claimants. Above all, there is a very basic understanding that African Americans are both typically docile and easily manipulated, especially through intimidation and by thin material incentives. This set of assumptions is fascinating because it undergirds *both* the explanation that the “big shots” were pushing poor unwitting people around, *and* the very tactics that the white power structure kept attempting to deploy to end the boycott. In other words the fundamental and longstanding view that black people were malleable as a group and could be intimidated as individuals determined the tactics that were used to maintain segregation *and* in almost all attempts to end the boycott.

Now, to be as clear as possible: I am not claiming here that these assumptions were ever in fact true, even though I have agreed with King, Rustin, and many others that fear and humiliation were very much integral to the maintenance of the system of de jure segregation. The point is rather more complex, and is dependent upon the claims that I have built over the preceding three chapters, from Hadot through Friedmann and to Foucault. Relations of power, of subjection, are both dynamic and uneven. The fundamental assumptions that an oppressive group holds about an oppressed group as subjects need not necessarily be *correct*, or fully correct, in order for them to operate effectively. This is especially the case if claims regarding the ontological status of a given group are naturalized, and thus understood to describe the “truth” of the transcendental nature of the other.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ “Interview with a Prominent Local Attorney and White Citizens Council Leader and Sam Englehardt, February 8, 1956,” 184.

¹⁶¹ Because Foucault does not believe in a transcendental subject at all, his entire project would quickly fail if such claims required such a status in order for the relations of power founded in them to function historically.

What matters, as I have attempted to show in the case of Montgomery, is that historical claims about the “docile nature” of African peoples do not need to be the case for tactics of intimidation, violence, humiliation, and economic deprivation to work. To put it more bluntly: it is eminently and profoundly sensible to be afraid of a group like the Klan, and even to endure certain privations of dignity to oneself when, for example, one simply needs to get to work. Indeed, the very simple reason that the scene in November with which we opened is so remarkable is that, regardless of any legal protection, no one could possibly be blamed for hiding at the presence of the most violent and dangerous domestic terror organization in American history. Racist claims about the ontological nature of a given group are certainly not necessary to understand that rather simple point, regardless of the views held by the Klan, WCC, or a Montgomery city bus driver.

In Montgomery, in practice, the self-purification and direct action that King and Rustin describe together constituted an ongoing form of explicitly political self-overcoming. If direct action is itself a practice of purification, and if its success depends precisely on rested souls, then even the preparatory training exercises so crucial to the mass movement are themselves forms of direct action. This is because in *acting directly* on one of the primary and necessary sites of contest—the subjectivity and dignity of acting participants—one also *acts directly* on the economic and political relations of power which rely on—indeed necessarily require—tired feet and weary souls, in order to work and proliferate.

V. Conclusion: On the Political Philosophy of Self-Overcoming

“Those of us who live our battles in the flesh must know ourselves as our strongest weapon in the most gallant struggle of our lives.”

—Audre Lorde, “A Burst of Light: Living With Cancer”¹

I. Martha Nussbaum: On the Politics of Anger

In “From Anger to Love: Self-Purification and Political Resistance,” her contribution to *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King Jr.*, Martha Nussbaum draws on her longer book-length treatment *Anger and Forgiveness* to provide a kind of taxonomy of anger. She does so, here and in the prior volume, to argue that Dr. King “follows closely the thought of Mohandas Gandhi about anger and resentment and advises a complete removal of those emotional attitudes.”² Nussbaum’s taxonomy is necessary to her argument here, as on her reading, “a wish for payback is a conceptual part of [anger and resentment].”³ And it is on that point, she claims, that both King and Gandhi reject the very idea and the very emotion of anger itself on both principled and pragmatic grounds.

Following Aristotle, Nussbaum argues that “the emotion of anger includes and rests upon the following thoughts:

1. The thought that something bad has been done by some agent, affecting adversely the interests of something or somehow of deep concern to the self.
2. The thought that this damage was wrongfully inflicted.
3. The thought that it would be good for the doer to suffer in some way.
4. The thought that the specific nature of the damage is typically that of a ‘down-ranking’ or diminution in relative status.⁴

¹ Lorde, “A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer,” 133.

² Nussbaum, “From Anger to Love: Self-purification and Political Resistance,” 105.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 106.

Nussbaum wholeheartedly accepts the first two criteria and dismisses the fourth. In so doing, she notes that “Many people and many societies (including predominantly our own) do encourage many people to care overwhelmingly about relative status and to see everything that happens as a move in a zero-sum game of social rank.”⁵ Nussbaum concludes, however, that this “is an objectionably narrow way of looking at life,” *tout court*, and moves on. (I will return to this part of the argument below.)

Nussbaum then focuses on the third of Aristotle’s criteria, the most important for her argument. In so doing, she quickly concludes, based on her arguments in *Anger and Forgiveness*, that this third criterion, “this wish for payback is in fact, as Aristotle insists, a conceptual part of what might be called ‘garden-variety anger.’” And that “without that wish, the emotion is likely to be something else: compassionate grief, perhaps.”⁶ For this reason,

In my view, and in agreement with a large number of philosophers and psychologists,⁷ anger has two parts: a protest part and a payback part. The protest is an assertion that damage was wrongfully inflicted. And then the payback part says that some type of retribution is an appropriate response to the damage. These two parts can in principle come apart, although in real life they are very commonly linked.⁸

This definition is thus the basis of Nussbaum’s general criticism of the emotion and concept of “garden variety anger:” “The primary defect is that the payback idea does not make sense.”⁹ It does not make sense for a number of reasons, in part because on this view it does not lead to ethically or politically productive results in the long run; it cannot bring peace, in other words. Anger, on this definition, necessarily entails revenge, and revenge is ethically, politically, and

⁵ Ibid., 108.

⁶ Ibid., 106.

⁷ It may be noted that aside from a few examples of the former, said philosophers and psychologists are never referenced in this piece. It would be worth investigating the conceptual, political, and methodological commitments of the latter in particular, were more precise references included in the piece in question.

⁸ Nussbaum, “From Anger to Love: Self-purification and Political Resistance,” 107.

⁹ Ibid.

pragmatically wrong. Thus, we—and it seems clear that this conclusion applies to *everyone* and to most, if not *all* cases—must reject anger in favor of what she calls “the Transition.”

Nussbaum defines the Transition as a “healthy segue from payback thoughts to constructive future-oriented work and hope.” Thus if one “is sensible and rational...she can decide to drop the payback idea and to focus on what would make sense and do good going forward. Such a person can and usually should continue to protest the wrong, but without the spirit of retribution.”¹⁰ In other words, one should take future-oriented action which will serve to resolve the problem in question in part by preventing it from arising again, but they should do so—or perhaps *can only do so*—without anger.

It is worth noting however that there seems to be an at least implicit distinction between anger and violence within Nussbaum’s argument. Nussbaum, like King, is not an absolute pacifist. Indeed, she follows King in granting exceptions for self-defense,¹¹ and fairly criticizes Gandhi’s argument for deploying non-violence against Hitler or the possible Japanese invasion of India during the Second World War.¹² Similarly, she makes note of a larger discussion in *Anger and Forgiveness* of Nelson Mandela’s precise, tactical endorsement of limited violence in the struggle against apartheid.¹³ I take it, however and therefore, that where *violence* may be justified in such cases, *anger* would have the same status: even violent acts must be done only in the spirit of Transition. Violence then is permissible under certain conditions: it must not only be

¹⁰ Ibid., 108.

¹¹ Ibid., 111.

¹² Ibid., 118.

¹³ Ibid., 112. Note that along with the Civil Rights Movement in the US and the Indian independence struggle, the South-African movement against apartheid is the third major twentieth-century non-violent movement that she takes as representative, and upon which she bases her overall positive claims. Nussbaum’s full arguments about Mandela (and indeed Gandhi) are elaborated in detail in *Anger and Forgiveness*, and only briefly referenced in the shorter King piece.

as limited in scope as possible and taken up for strictly tactical reasons, but must also be fully dispassionate, with a practical rather than emotionally retributive end-goal.

All that being said, there is a kind of caveat with regard to anger itself, in something that Nussbaum calls “Transition-Anger:” “there are at least a few cases in which one is there already: the *entire* content of one’s emotion is, ‘How outrageous! Something must be done about this.’ Let us call this emotion *Transition-Anger*, because it is anger, or quasi-anger, already headed down the third fork in the angry person’s road.”¹⁴ Thus, “Transition-Anger, in short, has the protest part of anger without the payback part. Transition-Anger does not focus on status; nor does it, even briefly, want the suffering of the offender as a type of payback for the injury;” these two criteria are important, and I return to them below. Nussbaum thus concludes that Transition-Anger “never gets involved at all in that type of magical thinking. It focuses on social welfare from the start. Saying ‘Something should be done about this,’ it commits itself to a search for strategies, but it remains an open question whether the suffering of the offender will be among the most appealing.”¹⁵ (I take it, incidentally, that in this schema permissible *violent* acts either cannot or most likely would not occur through Transition-Anger).

What Nussbaum calls “garden-variety” anger is thus distinguished from “Transition-Anger” in that the “garden variety” necessarily entails an impulse toward “payback.” Once that specific impulse is abandoned, it is no longer “anger,” properly speaking, but the “Transition.” “Transition-Anger,” on the other hand, is a kind of unique emotional-practical state, distinguished from Transition by specifically temporal criteria: one’s outrage immediately (or almost immediately) results in a practical, future-oriented attitude and attending action. The distinction between these attitudes—as Nussbaum does refer to these concepts as emotional or

¹⁴ Ibid., 109.

¹⁵ Ibid.

attitudinal states—is somewhat confused however when she states, in almost offhand way, that the “protest” and “payback” parts of what she calls garden-variety anger “can in principle come apart, although in real life they are very commonly linked.”¹⁶ This claim is strange because by her own account, if those two aspects were to “come apart,” we would therefore be talking about either the Transition or Transition-Anger, depending on the circumstances around their disjuncture—but not garden-variety anger, by definition. For that reason, it is unclear just what Nussbaum means in this brief statement, or what its implications are for her overall argument and the set of distinctions which constitute it.

What is clear is that for Nussbaum, *anger* as commonly understood, indeed as an emotional state or attitude, has no place in productive political work, or what she calls “revolutionary justice”¹⁷ here, again drawing on her work in *Anger and Forgiveness*. The latter, as a consequence of her arguments here and elsewhere, necessarily excludes the former. At the same time, Nussbaum does concede that “garden-variety anger can often be instrumentally useful, and this in three ways”¹⁸ or, as she puts it a page later, “Anger might seem to have three valuable roles in a revolutionary transition.”¹⁹ However, these possible roles are presented with a certain skepticism; of the first two, she says the following:

First, it can be a signal or wake-up call to oneself that something is badly amiss. However, given the strong connection of anger to status-injury, this signal is often inaccurate. Second, and important for our purposes, anger may motivate people who might otherwise despair to get up and do something. This can be accomplished by Transition-Anger alone, as when loving parents do something about their child’s bad behavior. But anger with the baggage of the payback wish may often motivate real people, initially, to engage with a protest movement. Their motives may be an unclear mixture of payback wish with constructive desire for change.”²⁰

¹⁶ Ibid., 107.

¹⁷ Ibid., 105.

¹⁸ Ibid., 109.

¹⁹ Ibid., 111.

²⁰ Ibid., 109. Note that Nussbaum reiterates these three criteria, much more neutrally and concisely, two pages later: “First, it is seen as a valuable signal (both to the oppressed themselves and to others) that the oppressed recognize the wrong done to them. It also seems to be a necessary motivation for them to protest and struggle against injustice and to communicate to the wider world the nature of their grievances. Finally, anger seems, quite simply, to be

Two pages later, Nussbaum articulates the third possible role: “Finally, anger seems, quite simply, to be justified: outrage at terrible wrongs is right, and anger (including its retributive wish) thus expresses something true.”²¹

But the word *seems* here is crucial to her argument, within which anger, as she defines it, can never be “justified,” in the way she defines that term as well. Rather: “When an instance of anger is right about what has occurred, about its wrongfulness, and about its seriousness, then I call that anger ‘well-grounded.’ I do not grant that it is ‘justified,’ because if it is ordinary anger, it includes the payback wish, and that is never appropriate or well based. ‘Well-grounded’ means, then, ‘right about everything except the payback idea.’”²² Based on Nussbaum’s taxonomy, even this clarification seems to amount to further specification and reiteration of the set of concepts she establishes. Technically, *only* “Transition-Anger” can be “well-grounded,” because it does not include the “payback wish.” Thus its status as well-grounded is a consequence of the definition of the concept itself.

At the same time, it is not clear what the difference between “justified” and “well-grounded” is meant to be, since it seems that the term “justified” here only has a negative value: it is, on the logic of Nussbaum’s taxonomy here, *only* a description of what “garden variety anger” *cannot be*. If anger were *justified*, that would mean that it is *not anger at all*, and instead either “Transition-Anger” or the “Transition” itself, which is no longer anger (since it has shed the payback wish by definition), and would therefore be “well-grounded” in either case. And if

justified: outrage at terrible wrongs is right, and anger (including its retributive wish) thus expresses something true.” (ibid., 111.)

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 109-10.

“well-grounded” and “justified” are somehow opposed, that would mean that the moment something is justified it is no longer justified—it becomes “well-grounded.”

The emotional state of anger, as strictly defined by Nussbaum, can be neither justified, nor righteous, in any case, or any scenario. And insofar as an emotional state *like anger* is “well-grounded,” it is *only* so insofar as it immediately or eventually abandons the impulse toward retribution, and at that moment, it becomes something else entirely. On this account, only the “Transition” can lead to justice, and insofar as this concept is something *transitional*, as its name implies, it is a state within which we do not simply find ourselves, but to which we must find our way. This is the role, on Nussbaum’s reading, of what King calls self-purification. And it is precisely here that my reading of King begins to depart from that of Nussbaum. That departure itself, in turn, is the most fertile ground for concluding the investigations that constitute this dissertation.

I.i. Nussbaum’s “Transitional” Self-purification and the Problem of Moralism

To her profound credit, Nussbaum is incredibly thorough, and her distinctions are coherent, consistent, and “work” in the sense of being uncontradictory. Her arguments, in other words, are systematically true to themselves, despite the complications that I have already pointed out. And yet, despite their internal coherence, from the perspective of the history of radical and revolutionary politics in general, *and* the problems raised by a politics of self-change as I have articulated it over the course of this project, her formulation raises a number of telling ethical, political, and philosophical questions.

In the most preliminary way, for those embedded and versed in the forms of revolutionary struggle at issue, Nussbaum’s overall liberalism and particular claims about anger

may seem at once ahistorical, naïve, or even paternalistic, in ways that are worth exploring. Now, that being said, my interest here is *not* in making claims of that type, nor to challenge Nussbaum on those grounds; such challenges are not my ultimate concern—at least not in and of themselves. Instead, those grounds, those questions, in contrast to a view like Nussbaum’s, are able to play a rather different role, one that will prove useful in bringing my overall investigations here to a close.

From the framework of a philosophy of political self-change, the kinds of challenges to Nussbaum that I have in mind here can serve to illuminate crucial formal, ethical, and political gaps in a classical-liberal (and contemporary-philosophical) approach to and understanding of both forms of political resistance *and* the idea of “self-purification.” The point is not, then, to list the details of the gaps in and political-philosophical problems with Nussbaum’s approach as an end in itself. While interesting on their own, taken collectively these details are able to perform the much more important work of articulating a broader *formal* problem with any approach to practices of political self-purification, and the larger category of which it is part, on the philosophical model adopted by even as careful and thorough a reader as Nussbaum.

More precisely, in the terms that I have developed over the course of this dissertation, Nussbaum’s work can be read as the articulation of a free-standing *telos*, embodied, theoretically, in what I will call the figure of an idealized and thus ungrounded “Transitional Sage.” That ideal model is wholly divorced from the kind of granular diagnostic of spiritual demands that Hadot and Friedmann have demonstrated is so crucial to work of this kind. It also fails, in contrast with Foucault, to fundamentally question the assumed relationship between ethical and political life that undergirds and shapes the nature of the investigation on the most fundamental levels. And finally, for these formal reasons, it is highly vulnerable to moralism.

Nussbaum's *telos* is developed independently of larger political and material conditions, and her formulation answers first and foremost to the theoretical commitments of political liberalism. This allows her to conflate certain features of the ethical lives of individuals and the political existences of groups and systems, though in a way that does not, as Friedmann and Foucault ask us to, place them side-by-side. Instead, as evinced by Nussbaum's general approach to the concept of anger, her treatment of the notion of self-purification, and most tellingly in some of her representative examples, her views can be argued to ultimately reduce the political to a form of the ethical.

Perhaps the most telling insights into this problem come from observing the fact that Nussbaum's work at once places practices of self-purification at the center *and* barely addresses, let alone analyzes, such practices in any detail. A central concept of the argument thus goes completely unspecified, and is not connected in any robust way to either the anger-less state of ideal orientation that Nussbaum articulates, nor to the conditions which give rise to the need for protest, nonviolent or otherwise, in the first place. Nussbaum's work here, in its central and quasi-exclusive focus on arguing against any role for anger in the practical work of justice, is thus wholly ungrounded in the terms that I have articulated over the course of this dissertation. And for *that* reason, it represents precisely the contemporary philosophical approach to the study of spiritual exercises that someone like Hadot, from the outset, rejects.

Thus to reframe Nussbaum's overall arguments from this perspective will allow us to see not simply what is "missing" from her arguments, but will also illuminate just *why* certain things are missing. Moreover and above all, it will allow me to reiterate just why such factors are so important, and to thereby serve as a reminder as to why understanding philosophy *as a form of*

life—philosophy as Hadot understands and articulates it—is not simply an intellectual shift, but a practical call—perhaps even a political demand.

Such an approach, as I have argued, entails both a conceptual revaluation of the fundamental relationship between ethics and politics, one that does not reduce to a basic moralism. Moreover, the preceding investigations allow us to discern the ways in which the threat of moralism is in fact closely indexed to even the best of the more traditional philosophical approaches to these questions, as represented by Nussbaum.²³ And finally, that the threat of moralism itself *and* the positive revaluation of the ethical-political confluence also entails a methodological shift that I have begun to try and articulate over the course of this project. Thus, with the (negative) assistance of Nussbaum, I will conclude these studies by re-demonstrating, in brief, just why understanding philosophy as Hadot, Friedmann, Foucault, and King do, necessarily entails not merely a new form of thinking, but indeed a new form of philosophical, and indeed political-philosophical, life.

In order to do so, we will need to first understand precisely what role this concept of self-purification plays—or does not play—in a text like “From Anger to Love: Self-Purification and Political Resistance.” And in order to do that, we will first need to rehearse some of the possible objections to Nussbaum’s overall approach, specifically those objections that would reflect a closer concern with the first-personal experiences of activists and organizers within the kinds of movements Nussbaum invokes, and from the perspective of a political philosophy of practices of self-overcoming as I have begun to articulate here. The point, again, is not whether or not

²³ A possible future extension of this project could articulate the ways in which political liberalism is particularly vulnerable to moralism—indeed how many of the theoretical and concrete iterations of liberalism could be argued to necessarily *amount* to moralism. It would be my very tentative contention, in such a study, that *only* something like Friedmann’s “socialism with a human face”—or in my terms, only a vision which begins with Marx and deals properly and robustly with Foucault—could fully inoculate itself from the moralist challenge.

Nussbaum may have a response to such objections already embedded within her arguments. The point is rather the way in which such challenges are able to highlight crucial methodological differences in her liberal-philosophical approach, and the forms of investigation both individually and collectively articulated by figures like Hadot, Friedmann, Foucault, King, and others.

In the terms initially described in Chapter 1, an investigation of this kind can be seen as a kind of ethical-political diagnosis, which in turn makes logical and political demands on both the *telos* and the practices entailed by their relationship. This specific diagnostic exercise will allow me to point up both the ungrounded and thus insufficient nature of Nussbaum's free-standing *telos*, and the problems thereby evinced by her limited and underspecified conception of practices of self-purification. I will proceed, for these reasons, on the model of Diagnosis-Practice-Telos, as first articulated in Chapter 1.

II. Diagnosis: On the Conceptual Limits of Anger

From the perspective of what might be called a kind of phenomenology of organizing, Nussbaum's list of distinctions between forms of anger may seem to be overly rigid and limited in the face of the ways in which many activists and organizers have described themselves and their experiences from a first-person perspective. To be sure, if one defines anger, as Nussbaum does, as something that necessarily entails a retributive impulse then it is a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy to say that the work of justice after what she calls the "Transition" cannot be understood in terms of "anger." But as I have already intimated, it is possible that what we have is in fact a tautology that stems from the initial invocation of Aristotle, rather than, say, a close historical reading of the first-personal experiences of organizers against racial, economic, and

other forms of injustice, in the past century or two especially. This does not mean that Nussbaum's claims are necessarily "incorrect," but rather that a brief but thorough overview of the kinds of questions that a more directly empirical approach—one modeled methodologically on Hadot and Friedmann, for example—would need to ask, will allow me to highlight certain limitations endemic to her framework.

II.i. The Pragmatics of Intention

Nussbaum's blanket pronouncement that anger—specifically, as an emotion—cannot be part of revolutionary justice is puzzling for a number of reasons. While she does draw on Gandhi and King, it seems clear that in both of those cases, the *emotion* of anger has an ethical and political status at least in part as a result of given metaphysical, indeed religious, commitments held by the figures and communities in question. It is not clear that Nussbaum herself holds those same commitments, however. And even if one were, as she attempts, to base this rejection of anger on a psychological reading, the reasons for which we should grant a specific emotional attitude, the "desire for payback," the special status that she does are never articulated. Moreover, no distinction is made, as far as I can tell, between an emotional *desire* to harm the oppressor and actually carrying out such harm. And so it is possible to ask: what status—indeed, what power or role—does such a desire have if one does not act on it?

This question is particularly relevant to Nussbaum's uncompromising criticism of figures like Malcolm X. The latter, she claims, "strongly endorses the spirit of anger, including its retributive element, urging his followers to seize property by violence in retaliation for years of white domination."²⁴ This claim is in line with Nussbaum's seemingly top-down understanding

²⁴ Nussbaum, "From Anger to Love: Self-purification and Political Resistance," 116.

of organized mass-movements, in that it already grants Malcolm an enormous amount of agency in practically influencing the actions, behaviors, and indeed emotions of movement rank-and-file. Such a view misses the possibility, as I hope to have demonstrated in Chapter 4, that charismatic leadership—even great leadership—is often better understood as one fully-integrated aspect of the movement or organization, rather than its “head” properly speaking. While King is remembered as the figurehead of the Montgomery movement, he would certainly have agreed with the young Claudette Colvin that, in reality, the leaders were the people themselves.²⁵

Perhaps more importantly, the assumption of a top-down relationship between someone like Malcolm and the larger movement obscures the possibility that his angry rhetoric—retributive language and all—may have pragmatically served other purposes. In fact, a close look at the historical record will show that Malcolm himself never engaged in acts of unprovoked violence, nor did the NOI as an organization during his time with it. It is for this reason better perhaps to understand Malcolm’s performative speech not in term of “instructions” to his “followers,” but as either a form of pre-emptive self-defense against hostile whites and/or as a form of emotional catharsis—indeed, a formally familiar one, drawing on long traditions of preaching and oratory, despite whatever differences in content—for the community he was addressing.

This concern also highlights the fact that within Nussbaum’s text, it remains unclear if part of the criticism of anger is that its presence somehow precludes the possibility of accomplishing properly revolutionary goals. Without further specification, we may take Nussbaum to be saying that anger “poisons the well,” so to speak—though again, it is difficult to say for sure. However, it is worth pointing out that any claim of this kind, positive or negative,

²⁵ Colvin, “Transcript of Record and Proceedings, Browder v. Gayle, May 11, 1956,” 77.

would necessarily require that we define what it means to “accomplish” something at all, and to accomplish something called revolutionary justice specifically. In other words, we would need a proper diagnosis of the spiritual-material demands of the context in question, and would need to articulate both the range of *teloi* appropriate to it, and the forms of practice capable of attaining them.

Thus, although Nussbaum does not say so explicitly, there is an implication with her criticism that Malcolm’s anger was not just unacceptable, but that something about the precise way in which it was unacceptable means that it did not “accomplish” anything (or at least not anything worthy of the term). But that claim can only be made under a narrow view of “accomplishment” which necessarily already precludes the kind of work that someone like Malcolm was engaged in and, for example, its historical effects on future liberation movements. In other words, Nussbaum’s judgement of someone like Malcolm, at least on the efficacy, if not the ethics, of his work, is a foregone conclusion given the criteria with which she begins.

I will return below to the problem of these criteria, specifically in terms of the relationship of the origin to the form of such criteria overall. For now, it suffices to note that these possibilities collectively re-raise the question of just why a given emotional attitude, desire, or wish cannot simply be decoupled from concrete actions which may or may not necessarily follow from them. Hers is a Kantian, rather than Pragmatic, view—but that commitment is simply assumed, and never justified either philosophically or politically, at least not here.

II.ii. “Payback”

Nussbaum also seems to have a narrow definition of “payback” itself, which I take it seems to only refer to physical (or perhaps psychological) punishment, but which also seems to

implicitly include property destruction or damage. And yet, in many cases, the problem is precisely one of what constitutes “payback” to a given party. Here the question becomes even more complex: is “payback” something that is strictly defined by Nussbaum here? It is not clear, in fact, that property destruction, in a given context, would constitute an act of “violence”—at least not with the same status as physical or psychological harm—to many observers. Further, does it matter that a given party may not only define but *experience* something as payback outside of Nussbaum’s implicit definition?

An example that points up this confusion is the debate around monetary and other material reparations for the descendants of those whose labor was stolen through the system of chattel slavery. Many white Americans, conservative and liberal, take the very notion of reparations to be a form, precisely, of “payback,” in the sense of some kind of punishment for acts that they did not personally or even collectively commit. At the same time, advocates of reparations also see reparations as a form of “payback,” though in a very different, and far more literal sense: they would like to see the descendants of those whose labor power was stolen, and the fruits of which were passed on to others, to be quite literally *paid back* for that historical theft. This would, on either account, amount to a sacrifice on the part of non-Black Americans, either in strictly financial terms, or perhaps in the emotional wages of shame that many people, white Americans above all, argue that they both would experience and do not deserve to experience, in being made to “pay” for acts they did not personally commit.

If we define “payback” in this broader, though arguably more literal sense, would monetary reparations at the overall financial expense of non-Black Americans be acceptable to someone like Nussbaum? If so, and it seems likely given her commitments and statements elsewhere, this would still raise the questions of what we mean by “payback,” and more

importantly who gets to define what that means. Under Nussbaum's strict definition, reparations would not count as a form of payback; but how can that definition account for the possibility that some people may *experience* such a large-scale project of restorative justice as precisely that? My argument, to be clear, is *not* that we should not adopt a political project of reparations if it constitutes a form of "payback," but rather that the concept of "payback" is both acceptable and *necessary* to the cultivation of future justice in a case like this. Put bluntly in the case of reparations, "payback," in the most literal sense of that term, is precisely *why* that political project should be taken up.

II.iii. Anger vs. "Outrage"

Further, Nussbaum's argument, despite its rootedness in both philosophical and psychological discourse on anger, still seems to paint that concept and that emotion in very broad strokes. Even the concept of "transition-anger" seems to treat anger as something that *occurs* as a kind of emotional event in response to other events. In other words, Nussbaum seems to conflate "anger" as a state and "outrage" as an event. This seems evident from the language that she uses to describe that concept, and the unarticulated example implicit in that language:

There are many cases in which one gets standardly angry first, thinking about some type of payback, and then, in a cooler moment, heads for the Transition. But there are at least a few cases in which one is already there: the *entire* content of one's emotion is, 'How outrageous! Something must be done about this.' Let us call this emotion *Transition-Anger*...It focuses on social welfare from the start. Saying, 'Something should be done about this,' it commits itself to a search for strategies, but it remains an open question whether the suffering of the offender will be among the most appealing.²⁶

It is not so much the explicit definition of Transition-Anger that concerns me here, but rather what is implicitly entailed by the language of outrage and response.

²⁶ Nussbaum, "From Anger to Love: Self-purification and Political Resistance," 109.

Here, the implied example takes the form of some particular event, to which this outrage is a response. But the formal model of an outraged response to an unjust event, as representative of anger in general, is difficult to reconcile with the experience of anger as a *state of being* that emerges from and is sustained by ongoing, relentless states of historical injustice. White-supremacy, for example, has its moments of irruptive violence, but this does not mean it does not always already systematically shape the lives of people at every moment, even if just at a kind of political simmer—one that is accompanied by a correspondingly simmering (and righteous) state of anger.

In such cases, it seems clear that anger plays a role in not just motivating one to act, but *sustaining that action*, including non-violent action and campaigns of all kinds. This seems to be especially true when one engages the memory and experience of rank-and-file participants, beyond just the accounts of movement elites, specialists, and members of the leadership. Injustice is ubiquitous, and the righteous anger to which it gives rise is thus often described as something that too is ever-present as a result.

Indeed, this is the case even for figures like King himself, whose anger can be seen to spill over within his characteristically eloquent prose in texts like the “Letter from Birmingham Jail itself,” one of Nussbaum’s primary sources. In perhaps one of the most famous passages in the “Letter,” we can very much see King’s sustained anger rush forward, even as it is given form by his masterfully crafted language:

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at a horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say ‘wait.’ But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an air-tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can’t go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and

see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking ‘Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?’; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no hotel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading ‘white’ and ‘colored;’ when your first name becomes ‘n*****,’ your middle name becomes ‘boy’ (however old you are), and your last name becomes ‘John,’ and your wife and mother are never given the respected title ‘Mrs.’; when you are harried day and night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of ‘nobodiness’— then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.²⁷

It would, it seems to me, be very difficult to argue that passages like these are on the one hand not expressions of something that we can recognize as anger, at least not without re-describing what very clearly seems to be King’s first-person experience of that emotion, in language that is not his own. But this is not my point here.

Much more importantly, what we have in passages of this kind is the expression of an anger that is ongoing, sustained, and ever-present. As Taylor Branch reports, when Wyatt Walker, who transcribed King’s letter from the notes smuggled out of Birmingham Jail, read these passages, his apt description of the letter was to say that King’s “cup has really run over with those white preachers!” Walker, among others, had been “Long frustrated by what seemed to him King’s excessive forbearance,” and was thus “thrilled to see such stinging wrath let loose.”²⁸

The point is that, reviewing accounts like this and others, and paying careful attention to the prose itself, it is clear that anger against injustice itself is an historically central aspect of the *ongoing* work of justice, beyond just any preliminary “motivating” stage. Moreover, it is not, at least not on my reading, somehow logically or conceptually in conflict with that work either.

²⁷ King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 92.

²⁸ Taylor Branch, *Parting the waters : America in the King years, 1954-63*, A Spectrum book (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 740.

Further, it seems empirically clear that one can very much be angry at oppressive individuals and groups and *still* not wish them harm. Or, it seems clearly possible and historically attested that one can be angry at a situation, a set of circumstances, or a system of some kind. One can, in other words, clearly *be angry*—that is, describe oneself and experience oneself *as angry*—while working toward justice, and working toward self-change.

II.iv. Ethics and Politics, *or* Moralism, Redux

This in turn raises the question of the target or object of anger. In Nussbaum's view, anger always has a specific object, and that object is a *doer*, a responsible *party*—in other words, a human being. But cases abound in all manner of contexts, though especially those involving systemic injustices of the kind at issue here, in which one experiences and describes oneself as being angry at a system, situation, or other non-human cause. Nussbaum accepts this human-centric aspect of Aristotle's definition, but it is worth noting that Aristotle did not have access to concepts like systemic injustice (such as systemic racism), and thus such a concept would be naturally excluded from his view. A more contemporary, and indeed empirical, definition of anger would need to take into account the idea of being angry at capitalism, or cancer, or systemically racist institutions, and the like.

Nussbaum certainly could declare that such an experience of oneself does not count as anger, but that would again amount to a tautology: despite the many and varied real attestations of such emotional experiences and self-descriptions, if one defines anger without taking them into account, they are automatically excluded from that definition. This would in turn amount, on my view, to a way of skirting the issue, even if Nussbaum were to provide some other concept or definition for such an experience. And here the question must be raised: what is the value,

philosophical or political, of denying or disagreeing with someone over the way in which they describe and experience themselves and their lives, rather than taking those descriptions into account when addressing the very concerns to which they are intimately connected? How, in other words, can we articulate an ideal state, a *telos*, without providing the historical-philosophical diagnostic work that I have argued here is at the core of the approaches of Hadot, Friedmann, Foucault, and indeed King himself?

It is for this reason, among others, that I am concerned that Nussbaum's initial definition of anger may in fact shade into moralism, as it necessarily requires some "wrongdoers" as the target of one's anger *and* which it seems are simply assumed to always be individuals. In this way, I worry about what seems like a simple transposition of an ethical determination between particular human subjects into the political domain. As I have articulated over the course of this project, and as I believe the thinkers I have engaged here would agree, groups, systems, and state structures do not interact either with each other *or* with individuals in the same forms and with the same consequences as ethical encounters between individual subjects do. Indeed, that danger has been one of my central concerns throughout this project, and it is worth exploring further, as Nussbaum's invocation of Aristotelian ethics, of ancient Stoicism and other philosophical schools, and her singular focus on the views and experiences of individual leaders like King and Gandhi here, should be cause for concern, given all that I have argued over the course of this project.

While I myself may not have avoided this problem here completely, Nussbaum simply constitutes her analyses through the lens of the ethical lives of individuals, without explicitly acknowledging that approach in any way. Nor does she problematize here the question of translating ethical thought into the political domain, which I have tried to at least identify as a

problem here. All of this this may very well be a necessary result of her own liberal commitments, which I cannot comment on or analyze here. But If so, the appropriate response, on my view and as a result of all that I have argued here, would be to take note of and further investigate the ways in which liberalism too is highly vulnerable to moralism.

II.v. Race, Class, and Hierarchy.

Finally, the way in which Nussbaum's approach foregoes the work of philosophical diagnosis is perhaps most clear, ironically enough, in her seeming dismissal of Aristotle's fourth criteria. In fact, the idea that social "down-ranking" is somehow tangential to the concerns at issue—especially with regard to King himself—is somewhat strange. While the idea that the game of "social rank...is an objectionably narrow way of looking at life" may make sense from a certain perspective, it seems to very much miss the point—or at least one possible, though crucial point—within the political context within which someone like King is living, writing, and working. And from a Marxist or indeed Foucauldian point of view, as we have seen above, status is not simply about the emotional experience of status: rather, it is a relation of power inextricably tied to material and subjective conditions

We may, as it seems that Nussbaum does, either intentionally or not, fully and exhaustively index the idea of "social rank" or hierarchy to the purely psychological or subjective sense that one might, for example, find exclusively within the domain of bourgeois culture. In that sense of "social rank," understood on a "keeping up with the Joneses" model, Nussbaum is certainly correct: this can certainly be read as an ethically objectionable way of leading one's life.

But from the political perspective, from the perspective of relations of power, Aristotle's fourth criteria seems far more relevant than Nussbaum wants to concede here—above all within the context of the oppressive material and subjective conditions which revolutionary justice seeks to remedy. Race, class, and even gender are not merely psychological states or ethical concepts; they are instead forms of material hierarchy that have been *made real* though historical forces. They are relations of power that have an individual ethical status only insofar as they shape subjects in the ways that we have seen with the help of Friedmann, Foucault, and indeed King himself. Thus the claim that thinking in terms of social status is “objectionably narrow” is only possible on an already narrow view of what those forms of social hierarchy *do*.

Indeed, it is more likely than not that even the forms of shallow “intra-class” social jockeying that Nussbaum describes as objectionable narrow are rooted in, and indeed serve to sustain, the more clearly insidious forms of social hierarchy mentioned here. In other words, it seems sociologically and economically likely that “keeping up with” the neighbors as a feature of the suburban American landscape in the twentieth century (for just one example), has everything to do with the processes of *de facto* segregation, redlining, white flight, and other forms of racial, economic, and gender-based oppression and violence.

It is extremely difficult to argue to someone who is poor, or marginalized based on race, or most likely both, that social hierarchy is an illegitimate way of understanding oneself and one's relationship to the world. On the one hand, any victim of the material manifestations of that worldview—whether in its capitalist, feudalist, religious, or other forms—would note that this claim is very much obviously correct. Barring questions of ideological false consciousness, it is often clear to historical victims of social hierarchy, *as victims*, that we should not organize ourselves and our world in this way. On the other hand, it is also clear that insofar as such forms

of social hierarchy—even the seemingly shallow cases that Nussbaum seems to have in mind—are an integral part of material oppression, that they very much matter, and must be taken seriously not only as a practical political problem, but as a proper philosophical problem.

II.vi. Consequences for “Self-purification.”

My goal in rehearsing these problems is not to merely poke holes in Nussbaum’s arguments about anger and its role (or non-role) in movements of nonviolent resistance. I provide them rather in the service of reiterating certain methodological and theoretical consequences of my own overall project. Insofar as we are both concerned with the concept of what King calls “self-purification,” our approaches to that concept are radically different. This is again because Nussbaum begins with an ethical-political ideal analyzed and constituted almost wholly on its own terms. For Nussbaum, “anger” is an unacceptable emotional attitude for those working toward revolutionary justice. But, as I hope to have demonstrated, it seems as though all of conclusions in general follow from that premise, established on its own theoretical terms, and are then applied to the empirical and historical cases that she engages. She begins, in other words, with an ethical *telos*, when then determines the rest of the conceptual and methodological needs of her study. This is precisely the form of contemporary philosophical practice that someone like Hadot, or even Friedmann, read here as perhaps unwitting genealogists, at once outright reject, and the insufficiency of which for understanding practices like King’s self-purification is demonstrated in their work and elsewhere.

Given that pride of place in her thinking, the formulation of that *telos* has direct consequences for almost every aspect of the study. This includes a definition of “anger” that must necessarily exclude the reported self-understanding of movement participants (from King

to the present) in order to remain internally coherent, *and* a kind of “two-step” formulation that seems to strictly divide a “motivating” or preparatory stage (whether internally, externally, or both), from the practice of justice itself. Above all however, these issues have the greatest impact on the way in which she both understands and analyzes—or fails to analyze—the concept of self-purification and its attending historical practice. Nowhere are these consequences clearer than in a careful reading of the surprisingly limited treatment Nussbaum gives to the central concept of self-purification in the piece in question.

III. Practice: Self-purification Beyond Anger

At the very opening of “From Anger to Love,” Nussbaum makes the claim that “It is...generally acknowledged that [King’s] normative ethical theory includes a commitment to ‘self-purification.’”²⁹ So far, so good. But Nussbaum continues, first defining ‘self-purification’ as “internal attitudinal change,” and then arguing that King believed that “nonviolent protest that was not preceded by internal change was both undependable and spiritually inadequate.”³⁰ From the perspective of the conclusions that I have drawn on the politics of the category of practices of self-overcoming, of which King’s ‘self-purification’ is one of the representative cases, Nussbaum’s formulation raises a number of questions, some of which have greater consequences than others.

On the one hand, as I have demonstrated in Chapter 4, the argument that for King self-purification is something that strictly *precedes* direct action, is incorrect. King’s thinking in this regard is rooted in the long history and deep lessons of organizations like FOR on the one hand, and his own direct and immediate experience on the other. Both of these contexts, which come

²⁹ Nussbaum, “From Anger to Love: Self-purification and Political Resistance,” 105.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

together in his philosophical-political practice, demonstrate that self-purification *cannot* simply *precede* direct action, even as it is a *condition* of direct action. Instead, it must be taken up in an ongoing way during and even outside directed campaigns; at the same time, the practices and events of protest—direct action *itself*—may also constitute a form of self-purification. (And in this way, the practice itself parallels the emotional state of anger which does not simply motivate it, but sustains it as well). This is as clear from Rustin’s “Lesson Plan” (a text the spirit and very language of which clearly influenced King’s thinking as expressed in his “Letter,” as I have demonstrated above), and from King’s own writing and campaigns.

At the same time, it is not clear how important this detail is to Nussbaum’s overall claims. Indeed, it does not directly contradict her views, and could most likely be easily integrated into her picture. What is more difficult, however, is the specific way that she understands self-purification as both a process and a concept. In “From Anger to Love” specifically, there are two related problems in this regard, which are rather telling both on their own and in conjunction.

III.i. A Narrow Definition

Despite its inclusion in the title of the piece in question, the phrase “self-purification” only appears about three times in the article. The rarity of the concept in an article with that very concept in its title is not simply odd, but reflects a deeper problem: The concept of self-purification is only defined exceedingly briefly, only in passing, and in a very narrow sense that is strictly indexed to the problem of anger. Nussbaum first refers to self-purification as simply “internal attitudinal change,”³¹ but then—and only parenthetically—seems to define that change

³¹ Ibid.

solely as the “rejection of hatred,”³² or the complete removal of anger. As she puts it when describing the instrumental uses of anger in her schema, “Anger then, may bring people to King’s movement; once there, it must undergo purification or change.”³³ Thus, at least as far as Nussbaum’s direct comments are concerned, “self-purification” seems to specifically refer to the therapeutic process wherein anger is purged from the subject. It is the intentional cultivation of the Transition, insofar as the Transition is an active, justice-oriented but anger-less state.

III.i.a. Self-change is a Constant Struggle

If that is the case, it would make some sense for Nussbaum to hold the view, even implicitly, that self-purification necessarily precedes direct action, rather than something that can also accompany direct action and be coterminous with it in certain cases. Insofar as, for her, the work of justice must be done, by definition, without anger, one would have to purge all anger before engaging in such work. While Nussbaum does not treat this issue with the kind of specificity that would resolve these questions, and thus we cannot be sure, some of her other claims would reinforce my reading. Take, for example, her elaboration on the passage about the consequences of joining King’s movement:

People always have a choice what to do with their anger. If they follow it into King’s movement, rather than into the alternative he always mentions, rioting and destruction of property, then it appears that their attitude is pretty close to Transition-Anger already, because they might have chosen other movements that would help them pursue retributive goals.³⁴

While this is not at all her point in this passage, it is possible to see her setting up a kind of strict dichotomy here, one that would accord with her views on anger: if one is angry and takes action

³² Ibid., 122.

³³ Ibid., 116. The idea, as I have noted several times already, that it was “King’s movement” to which others would “come” in the first place, itself betrays one of Nussbaum’s relevant biases here.

³⁴ Ibid.

(not just preliminary action) based on that anger, than the types of behavior that one will engage in—indeed, which are so much as *available* to one—will themselves take a destructive form. On this view, strictly speaking, rioting, property destruction, and the like³⁵ would be the necessary consequence of non-Transitional action. One *cannot* engage in just acts if one acts on anger; and one *must* engage in what Nussbaum seems to feel are inherently self-defeating acts if one is angry. Thus *only* someone who has undergone a form of preliminary self-purification would be able to engage in properly just forms of protest.

This claim is of course speculative, insofar as Nussbaum does not provide enough detail to make a full determination of whether or not self-purification is in her view a process which must temporally precede direct action. Much more importantly, it seems as clear as possible from the text that for Nussbaum, self-purification strictly concerns the therapeutic removal of the emotion or attitude of anger and hatred—strictly speaking, of a desire for “payback.”

III.i.b. The Therapeutics of Fear and the Cultivation of Dignity.

Much more importantly, however, than the question of self-purification as a preliminary versus ongoing form of exercise, is Nussbaum’s seeming reduction of self-purification to a strict therapeutics of anger. In her view, it is this specific emotion or “attitude” that must be purged as the condition of just action toward a just world. And yet, as should be exceedingly clear from the arguments presented and primary resources engaged above in Chapter IV, anger is by no means

³⁵ It is worth noting that such acts are implicitly placed within the domain of violence on Nussbaum’s account; there is no discussion, at least not here, on the possible differences between bodily harm and property destruction, or even in the potential distinctions between kinds of property—including the crucial question of *whose* property one is talking about in a given case. Within the philosophy and concrete practice of political organizing, these questions do remain open, however.

the only—or most important—of the “passions” which impede direct action on King’s account, or in general.

This is odd, further, because Nussbaum draws on her well-known expertise in the ancient sources to make her claims about Gandhi and King. Perhaps her goal here and elsewhere is to simply make a point about anger, but the idea that any other emotion, state, or form of being is also “purified” through such practices is not acknowledged in this material. And yet, it is exceedingly clear from King, Rustin, and others, that *fear*, for example, is also a property which much be therapeutically “purified” through both preparatory training *and* practices of direct action. Moreover, as I have demonstrated above, feelings of shame and humiliation—all tied, moreover, inextricably to anger and fear—are also the target of practices of self-purification for King. Indeed, on a practical level, it seems clear that shame and humiliation may play a *far* bigger role in the forms of subjection that King is concerned with than even anger.

Moreover, from a Foucauldian point of view, shame and fear (among other emotions to be sure) are arguably the most central tools of subjection within the relations of power which constituted legal segregation in the Jim Crow south up until and including the Civil Rights period. *Anger*, while important, is much more clearly a *biproduct* of the practices of material and ethical subjection in question, whereas the condition of fear, states of shame, and an inexorably degraded sense of self-worth were absolutely central to the maintenance and proliferation of unjust conditions. Those conditions, moreover, in cases like legal segregation and other Jim Crow laws, operated precisely through forms of social hierarchy within which experiences of humiliation and personal degradation were deeply embedded.

Finally, the fact that fear and humiliation were cultivated within the relations of power constitutive of legal segregation, and were therefore targets of practices of self-purification for

King, reveals a further gap in Nussbaum's exclusive focus on anger. That is, for Nussbaum, self-purification is, as a consequence of her reading, a strictly *negative* practice; "purification" is understood here in a traditional way, as a process by which an unwanted feature is *removed*. It is not, on this view, a process by which desirable forms of life and ways of being are positively cultivated. But King, as we have seen, like Rustin—indeed, like Malcolm, Elijah Muhammad, and many of the other revolutionaries which Nussbaum dismisses—was interested in the positive cultivation of dignity, perhaps above all. And dignity, on *all* of these accounts, is not merely the absence of something—and it is certainly neither equivalent to nor a mere byproduct of the removal of anger.

Nor, however, is dignity in this case merely the result of purging humiliation *or* the initial conditions, material or otherwise, which produce the state of humiliation. Instead, as I have argued, the practice of dignity is itself one of the primary *conditions* of the transformation of the material, economic and ethical circumstances which operate *through* the production of fear and humiliation. As elaborated in Chapter 4, the courage with which the Montgomery community faced the Klan on the night with which we began is best understood not as the consequence of a shift in a legal status. Rather, the cultivation of that courage, its attending dignity and altered relationship to fear, itself gave rise to the Supreme Court's decision in *Browder vs. Gale*, by making the mass movement itself not only possible but sustainable.

On my reading, and I believe for King himself, the positive cultivation of courage and dignity were crucial to circumventing and disrupting the relations of power between the Black community and the white power structure in Montgomery which had sustained the status-quo since Reconstruction. The legal success of the movement, again, was tied directly to the positive, creative, cultivation of "new people," in a very specific sense. King's practices of self-

purification did not simply remove an emotion (if that description is itself wholly accurate), but cultivated new forms of being and living which were no longer subject or vulnerable to the tactics by which Jim Crow had been previously sustained. Those tactics were themselves predicated, as I have argued above, on a certain understanding of *who* the movements participants *were*, “on the level of the self and of being,” as Hadot would put it. Or, in other words, the “second nature” (or simply “nature”) of the Black community assumed by the white power structure—itsself on the level of an unquestioned “second nature”—was strategically upended through what King called self-purification. In its place were new people, with new purpose, capable of thereby critically intervening in the relations of material and ethical power by which *de jure* segregation operated in Montgomery, Birmingham, and elsewhere.

The practices of self-purification that King took up, with the help of Rustin, Smiley, and others of course, were thus so much more than a therapeutic removal of anger. They were also a negative therapeutics of fear, humiliation, and other such emotional states, as well as positive cultivation of courage, dignity and so on. Self-purification is thus a much more expansive category of practices, capable of bringing about new selves, and therefore new relations of power.

III.ii. Self-purification as a Philosophical Problem

The problem is not simply that there is no detailed argument for the limited, and implicitly assumed, conception of self-purification within Nussbaum’s work here. It is rather that these lacunae can be said to reflect a set of assumptions about the objects and concerns of philosophy itself, and political philosophy in particular. Self-purification, in its concrete, granular, and historical practice, is not assumed to be a proper object of philosophical

engagement. “From Anger to Love” contains not so much as a description of such practices or an analysis of how they do or do not “work,” let alone closer readings of the political consequences of taking up such practices. Nussbaum just seems to assume that these are practical questions for activists on the ground, where her own role as philosopher or political theorist is rather different. The problem, therefore, and somewhat counter-intuitively, is that such *gaps do not in fact matter much* for Nussbaum’s overall argument.

This is because for the kind of study of which Nussbaum is representative here, practices of self-change—one of the purported objects of the study—*are not understood to make methodological demands on the way in which philosophy is practiced or defined*. In other words, Nussbaum’s approach here, while far more historically engaged (as her work characteristically is) than many other like texts and thinkers, still reflects a more traditional, modern approach to philosophy as an academic practice. It is philosophy as we are trained to understand it—not, therefore, as Hadot understands it. In the latter case, as I have shown here, the specifics of that philosophical object—whether ancient spiritual exercises or King’s mid-twentieth century practices of self-purification—demand a different approach to philosophy itself.

Such an approach, as I have attempted to reconstruct it over the course of this dissertation, would require a much more fine-grained historical-philosophical engagement with the material, intellectual, and indeed spiritual conditions under which nonviolent practitioners take up practices of self-change. That form of investigation would in turn necessarily raise the kind of first-personal concerns about Nussbaum’s overall theoretical (and historical) approach that I’ve already begun to reference above. And those challenges to Nussbaum, as I will briefly describe them below, can in fact be understood in terms of a philosophical diagnosis, in the sense elaborated above with Hadot and Friedmann. When approached in this way, it becomes clear in

turn not simply that such a diagnostic process is lacking in Nussbaum's work, but just *why* it is missing, and what that itself entails for understanding kinds of practices that are, in fact, at the heart of our mutual concern here.

IV. *Telos*: The Ungrounded Sage

The reason that Nussbaum's arguments about anger are empirically insufficient, *and* the reasons that her conception of self-purification is so limited and underspecified are in fact the same. The problem is that Nussbaum's entire piece consists completely in an exacting, prescriptive, elaboration of an ethical *telos*—the prescriptive ethical claim that we must abolish “garden variety” anger and replace it with “the Transition.” That *telos*, moreover, is established wholly on its own terms, reliant on given philosophical-ethical commitments that aspire—and do so with great care to be sure—to balance the demands of liberal universalism and the historical specificity of the struggles in question. And yet, insofar as the former most immediately manifests in the establishment of the Transition as ideal *telos*, it necessarily overpowers the latter here.

Perhaps even more importantly however, Nussbaum's “Transition” as an ethical-political *telos*, is clearly a very difficult status to reach: the ability to achieve what she calls the “Transition” or even her concept of “transition-anger” are, as she herself is clear, radically distant from the standard, expected, and justified emotional and subjective states (or what she simply calls “attitudes”) of people in general, and oppressed people in particular. And the fact of that difficulty only further exacerbates the problem identified above, of how little mention there is of *how* one is meant to arrive at such a state. This is because this question, as I have argued, is

simply not a philosophical problem within the fundamental conception of philosophy according to which someone like Nussbaum operates.

Nussbaum's approach here thus evinces *precisely* the institutional and conceptual constraints that Pierre Hadot, from the beginning, argues mark contemporary philosophical discourse, and which Friedmann and Foucault, each in their own way, join him in taking issue with. Nussbaum is entirely devoted to the detailed—yet *prescriptive*—elaboration of an ideal ethical state, one that is presented, moreover, in broadly ahistorical and universal terms, even as it relies on historical examples for its initial formulation. In this way, the liberal telos of her “Transition” seems completely divorced from the specificity of the conditions and demands which give rise to both the anger in question and the very ideals themselves that she describes.

“Loving Parents.” This problem is further evinced in the metaphors and examples that she invokes outside of specific historical events—and the simple assumption that the former examples can really tell us something about the latter. This is evident, for example, when Nussbaum centers the metaphor of loving parents addressing bad behavior on the part of their children, as a model for the approach and attending attitude that should be taken by participants within a nonviolent mass-movement (or indeed, *any* participant in a revolutionary project of justice.) In her terms:

I illustrate the idea of Transition-Anger by discussing the attitude that loving parents typically have to the wrongful acts of their young children: they are outraged, but they don't wish for payback. Instead, wanting good to ensue for the child, they search for constructive strategies to ensure that this act is repeated. Transition-Anger is typically predicated on love. When one does not care about a person or group, one is less likely to adopt this constructive, forward-looking attitude and more likely to indulge in empty fantasies of payback.³⁶

³⁶ Nussbaum, “From Anger to Love: Self-purification and Political Resistance,” 109.

But even as the central point here is, I take it, the very general one that we should typically proceed based on love, the parental metaphor is not exactly apt, at least not in all cases.

First and foremost, by focusing on the bad behavior of children, Nussbaum continues to articulate anger in terms of an outraged response to an event. As I have already argued, this model does not quite fit with the ongoing, “simmering” nature of both structural injustice and the righteous anger that dialectically accompanies it. It is extremely difficult to fit the square peg of a child’s bad behavior into the triangular hole of systemic, structural injustice—they are just not the same sort of thing, neither formally nor in practice.³⁷

Moreover, and by extension, it is clear that parents have a very different relationship to power than their children, and that relationship does not seem to parallel the place that marginalized or oppressed people tend to have to their oppressors. From the Foucauldian perspective this is immediately obvious, whereas the liberal view may well obscure it, as seems to be the case here. And while the point seems to be that the organized who fight for justice do have a kind of moral (and perhaps ultimately political) power over the oppressor, in practice the way in which the materially powerful are able to respond to even the most organized justice movements is wholly unlike the resources children are able to deploy against their parents.

In the family metaphor, parents, especially ideally loving parents, simply do not navigate the behavior of even the most difficult children in the way that non-violent activists engage with the oppressive forces of the police, the state, or terrorist organizations such as the Klan. It is quite simply a radically different relation of power, and therefore a different kind of relationship overall. And again, while there may be a certain attitude of love and forgiveness in play, the political deployment of love in a social movement and the love of parents to children can only be

³⁷ It is also quite possibly the case that the status of the oppressor is simply not as important to the oppressed—and is indeed potentially irrelevant—as the ethical development of a children necessarily matters to loving parents.

understood along the continuum of degree that Nussbaum assumes through a framework that does not account for the analytics of power. Perhaps in cases like South Africa, the process of Truth and Reconciliation can be seen along these lines, but that still only works as a metaphor because the ANC was able to inaugurate such a process only after *taking political power* from the unjust apartheid regime. There is love, and then there is love; just as there is anger, and then there is anger.

Infidelity and Spite. In another case, Nussbaum invokes the ethical problem of anger with regard to an extra-marital affair resulting in a divorce and re-marriage, embedded in her argument that a wish for retribution is a necessary aspect of anger:

But it is important for our purposes to remember that [the wish for payback] does not necessarily entail the thought that the wronged person should actively take revenge herself. She may simply want the law to do so, or some type of divine justice....Or, even more subtly, she may simply want the offender's life to go very badly in the future, hoping, for example, that the second marriage of a betraying spouse will turn out to be a dismal failure.³⁸

To be clear, in her book *Anger and Forgiveness*, Nussbaum does distinguish between different “spheres of human activity,” in which anger may operate differently: “the sphere of intimate personal relations; a sphere I call the ‘Middle Realm, meaning the realm of interactions which are neither intimate nor political...and finally, anger in the political realm.”³⁹ The remarriage metaphor clearly exists within the first, and the political concerns at issue within the third. Nussbaum’s point, however, is that whatever practical differences may exist across those “spheres,” the emotion of anger, insofar as it necessarily entails a wish for payback, is unacceptable in all cases.

³⁸ Nussbaum, “From Anger to Love: Self-purification and Political Resistance,” 107.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

And yet Nussbaum can only so much as invoke such a metaphor on the premise that the emotions surrounding infidelity are *formally* applicable—and thus substantively parallel—to the kinds of anger experienced by those engaged in the political work of organizing against injustice. The anger of the ex-spouse is therefore somehow alike in form to the anger of those who have suffered under the brutal histories of Jim Crow or Apartheid. But this assumed parallel is never articulated or justified, and it is my sense that the assumption of singular, unified, conception of the emotion of anger—regardless of origin or object—is rooted somehow in Nussbaum’s liberalism, though there is no time or space here to further explore that hunch.

Suffice it to say that from a Foucauldian or Marxist point of view on the one hand, and from the perspective of activists from Rustin to Audre Lorde on the other, it is possible to demonstrate that there is little in common between the ethical banality of Nussbaum’s example of an extra-marital affair, and, for example, the righteous anger evoked by the epidemic of extra-judicial murders of Black people in the US by police and other state bodies. For Nussbaum, the radical difference in both the circumstances and objects of that anger—the intentionality of the emotion, to put it in phenomenological terms—is fully elided.

A further question may be posed here of Nussbaum’s approach in this example: if we cannot call righteous anger just that—righteous anger—and must instead speak of something called the “Transition,” why is *this* the domain in which such a distinction should be made. Do we not already have words and concepts—such as spite, for example—for cases like the jilted lover who wishes a former spouse to suffer? Why not rely on the language that we already use, and that activists, organizers, and rank-and-file workers for justice deploy every day, the language of a “righteous” or “channelized” anger, and distinguish that from “spite,” for example? Why instead partition the ordinary concept of anger into “anger” and “transition,” in a

way that seems to necessarily tell someone like King, or Audre Lorde, or so many others, that they are incorrect in their self-description? Why not simply note that the ex-spouse is being “petty” or “spiteful,” rather than placing the ideal of righteous, channeled, political anger within the same formal continuum as the assuredly unproductive spite of a bitter ex-lover?

Nussbaum, on my reading, never answers that question. And if there is a reason that she does not answer such a question, it can only be because she is never motivated to first pose it as one.

IV.i. The “Transitional Sage” as Pure Telos

In both of these metaphors—loving parents and divorce and re-marriage—the problem is not a difference in *degree*, but rather a difference in *kind*. Nussbaum, on my reading, can only see a continuity between such individual ethical examples and broader political movements by eliding ethics and politics on precisely the model that the figures I have engaged in this project implicitly or explicitly reject. In this elision, Nussbaum does not operate from a radical reformulation of the relationship of ethics and politics (as Friedmann and Foucault do most clearly), but rather instead reduces the political to the ethical writ-large—a form, in the last analysis, of moralism. That moralism, insofar as it is indeed a moralism, seems to be rooted to some extent in Nussbaum’s political liberalism, though again the conceptual work required to fully elaborate that claim will have to wait for a future project.

Much more importantly for my purposes here, the version of moralism that we see here is also and further rooted in a conception of philosophy itself and the methodological consequences of that understanding. That is, Nussbaum’s concern in this piece and in her book is to answer the traditional ethical question of “what does the good look like?” It is for that reason that in this

shorter piece and in her book, what we ultimately have is an exhaustive description of an ideal state or model—here, what I call Nussbaum’s “Transitional” Sage. Her goal is to describe an ahistorical, universal, and internally coherent ideal: a *telos* that is “true to itself,” above all—and it is to *that* universal, internal coherence that *all* other factors must answer. This is in no small part the reason that her definition of anger departs so radically from the first-personal experiences and descriptions of anger by political activists (especially the rank-and-file) in the very movements that she describes.

Nussbaum’s sage is a kind of composite image of the figures of King, Gandhi, Mandela, and others, including the Greek and Roman philosophical traditions that she alludes to. And yet, despite her crucial qualifications regarding the impractical extremity, for example, of Gandhi’s more radical pacifism (or that of someone like Tolstoy), her Transitional sage is also still a perfectionist model. Despite her arguments to the contrary, it is something that some real figures *may* approach, but it is very unclear if even King himself, upon whom this model is largely based, actually embodied it.

It is also a sage, a *telos*, without spiritual exercises, and one with only a semi-defined diagnosis. It is a free-standing, universal *telos* that does not take into account the specificity of the conditions to which that anger-less state is meant to respond. It does not so much as pose the question of the circumstances under which the abolition of anger is either desirable or possible, but instead simply assumes that this is indeed a valuable state on its own merits. And because the elaboration of this state is untethered from and unconditioned by the specific, historical political and ethical conditions on the ground, it necessarily overlooks the question of self-change—even as Nussbaum invokes King’s notion of self-purification. It is my sense, then, that the liberal methodological and theoretical lens through which Nussbaum and others approach this question

is also the reason for the rather limited notion of self-purification (as simply the removal of anger) that she deploys and elaborates within the paper.

Her nearly-exclusive focus on a description of the ideal is also, as I have argued, the root of her extremely limited notion of self-purification—if for no other reason that the latter is not taken to be the ‘real’ philosophical problem. This is not to say that Nussbaum thinks that the practice and process of self-purification, however defined, is somehow an *easy* one. Rather, my point, and the very point of this entire dissertation, has been to demonstrate that the *way in which it is difficult* is not simply a practical issue that is somehow secondary to the traditional ethical-philosophical goal of identifying and articulating a set of ideals. It is instead, as Hadot, Friedmann, Foucault, and even King himself help to demonstrate, a philosophical problem in its own right. And it is one, moreover, that has direct consequences for the ethical and political ideals that one works toward, in practice, and as a form of life.

V. Conclusions

My goal in this reading of Nussbaum has been to highlight a methodological contrast, one that is indexed directly to a specific philosophical object: here, the concept of self-purification, as not simply described but *practiced* by King and others. That concept is to be taken as representative of the larger category of practices of self-overcoming articulated over the course of this project. Following Pierre Hadot’s fundamental insights, I have attempted to demonstrate the ways in which this object of investigation necessarily entails a specific, and non-current, form of reading and research. The example of Nussbaum’s political-liberal reading, as the articulation of a freestanding ethical *telos*, is meant here to demonstrate what one necessarily misses—and what one must necessarily elide—in even the most sophisticated attempts to

approach these questions from the contemporary philosophical approach that Hadot demonstrates is insufficient to that task.

Nussbaum's approach looks to King, Gandhi, and others as philosophers, a crucial intervention, indeed a radical one, and a challenge that must be taken up. But that approach, in so doing, still engages such figures solely on the level of thought and cognition, and thus on the uninvestigated premise that the cognitive domain constitutes the limits of philosophy itself.⁴⁰ In other words, if Nussbaum rightly sees King as a philosopher, she does so on the model of contemporary academic philosophy. Indeed, despite some robust engagement with these figures as activists and organizers, contrasted with an analysis founded on the model of philosophy as a form of life, the model that Hadot excavates from the ancient sources,⁴¹ the gaps and limitations in Nussbaum's approach are thrown into strong relief.

Moreover, those limitations have direct theoretical and practical consequences for her approach to the question of self-purification as it appears in King. Indeed, the singular focus on anger is itself symptomatic of the way in which Nussbaum looks to the success of the movements in question, and from there draws the universal conclusion that "these are the right tools for any or most jobs." One consequence of my own investigations is the distinct possibility that, instead, these were the right *jobs* for a specially calibrated sub-set of these *tools*. And indeed, if all that I have articulated in this project has been coherent, it should be clear that we may shift the central question from "What does the good look like?" to something like "How do we get there?" Rather than beginning from an ideal and asking how to achieve it practically, it is possible to *begin* "from the middle" as it were, with the latter question: How, by what practices,

⁴⁰ See Foucault on what he calls the "Cartesian Moment" in Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, 14.

⁴¹ This is again odd, given that Nussbaum herself is a deservedly respected authority on many of those sources, and invokes the Stoics in particular several times in the piece in question.

in what ways, may we change ourselves? The questions which follow from *there*, as I hope to have demonstrated over the course of this project, are radically different from those which follow from the classic inquiry, “What is the good?”

This shift in perspective can be said to mirror Foucault’s shift away from the injunction to “Know thyself,” to that of caring for oneself.⁴² From the previous framework, this new question will look strange, difficult, and perhaps absurd in its new pride of place. It will seem to slip constantly back not simply into the previously central problem—how to know oneself, or how to identify an ideal ethical-political state of being—but into the implicit supporting concepts and historically-a-priori frameworks which are the very condition by which those questions may be centered in the first place.⁴³

Or, perhaps we need not simply or exclusively begin with the question of self-change, but instead from the wholistic, dialectical, nexus of practice and diagnosis: “How might we change ourselves?” and “What do these specific injustices look like?” Or, put differently, “In what do our spiritual demands now consist?” The further questions which emerge from this point proliferate rapidly: What is the relationship between changing selves and changing material conditions? Must we simply assume, with the moralists (whether conservative, classical-liberal, or simply spiritualist) that self-change is the basic building block of political change? Conversely, must we follow the *Marxist naïf*, in holding that subjective, ethical transformation is strictly a causal biproduct of economic and material forces? Or might we join Friedmann and Foucault in reframing the question entirely, and asking how we might conceive of an ethical-

⁴² See again Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, Lectures 1 & 2.

⁴³ This, from Foucault’s perspective, is where the genealogical work would come in. But understood in this way, even genealogy itself, we are reminded, is also a practice of self-overcoming: one which causes a shift not just in one’s beliefs, but in one’s fundamental outlook, the framing concepts that we do not so much as consider when considering these problems.

politics or a political-ethics, re-read through the question of practices of ethical self-overcoming, in which neither the ethical lives of individuals nor the political, material, and economic existence of groups, systems, and structures, are subordinated nor “made prior” to one another? On the foundations initially set by Hadot, I hope to have shown here, with the concentric and mutually-informing contributions of Friedmann, Foucault, and King, just what such a non-reductive, perhaps dialectical, ethical-political *form of life* may look like.

And so, the kinds of shift in focus that I have proposed here have direct and necessary consequences all the way up and down the methodological and conceptual scaffolding. This includes consequences for the traditional question of identifying and describing the good, Nussbaum’s ultimate question. At the same time, any methodological shifts on the model and in the terms that I have suggested here could never abandon the search for ideal principles. That would be absurd, and leave philosophers and organizers alike adrift without a guiding focus, vision of justice, or the like. The point, as Hadot so well demonstrates, is simply that the identification of any ethical-political telos must occur in some form of conjunction with the questions of diagnosing spiritual demands on the one hand, and understanding, articulating, and bringing into being practices of self-change on the other.

Thus on a method developed from the insights of Hadot, Friedmann, Foucault, and King, the ways in which we think about ethical practices of self-overcoming will dialectically and mutually influence the ways in which we constitute a vision of justice, and indeed of injustice. In so doing, spiritual exercises, such as the practices of self-purification taken up by King, Rustin, Smiley, and others, are no longer merely subordinate or an afterthought to ideal principles. They are instead restored in their dignity as proper objects of philosophical investigation. And, in so doing, they restore and reframe a vision of philosophical investigation, one that is again and at

once a form of philosophical *action*. And while the contents of that action are certainly and importantly different across time and place, it is a form of philosophical life recognizable in the ancient schools that Hadot describes, and embodied in the ongoing work of dignity and justice carried out by King, the Montgomery community, and those laboring for justice who came before and who have followed since.

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