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## Ancient Spiritual Exercises and “Christian Philosophy”

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It was the great merit of Paul Rabbow to have shown, in his *Seelenführung*,<sup>1</sup> in what sense the methods of meditation set forth and practiced in Ignatius of Loyola’s *Exercitia spiritualia*<sup>2</sup> were deeply rooted in the spiritual exercises of ancient philosophy. Rabbow begins his book by discussing the various techniques by means of which rhetoricians throughout antiquity sought to persuade their audiences. These included, for example, oratorical amplification and *litelke*, stirring descriptions of events.<sup>3</sup> Above all, Rabbow gives a remarkable analysis of the exercises practiced by the Stoics and Epicureans, emphasizing the point that they were *spiritual* exercises of the same kind as we find in Ignatius of Loyola. On both these points, Rabbow’s book opened the way to new areas of research. It is possible, however, that even the author himself did not foresee all the consequences of his discovery.

In the first place, Rabbow seems to me to have linked the phenomenon of spiritual exercises too closely to what he terms the “inward orientation” (*Innenwendung*)<sup>4</sup> which, he claims, took place in the Greek mentality in the third century BC, and which manifested itself in the development of the Stoic and Epicurean schools. As a matter of fact, however, this phenomenon was much more widespread. We can already detect its outlines in the Socratic/Platonic dialogues, and it continues right up until the end of antiquity. The reason for this is that it is linked to the very essence of ancient philosophy. It is *philosophy itself* that the ancients thought of as a spiritual exercise.

If Rabbow tends to limit the extent of spiritual exercises to the Hellenistic/Roman period, the reason is perhaps that he restricts himself to considering their ethical aspect alone. Moreover, he considers ethics only in philosophies like Stoicism and Epicureanism, which appear to accord pre-

dominance to ethical questions in their instruction. In fact, Rabbow goes so far as to define spiritual exercises as moral exercises:

By “moral exercise,” we mean a procedure or determinate act, intended to influence oneself, carried out with the express goal of achieving a determinate moral effect. It always looks beyond itself, in as much as it repeats itself, or at least is linked together with other acts to form a methodical ensemble.<sup>5</sup>

With the advent of Christianity, Rabbow continues, these moral exercises were transformed into spiritual exercises:

Spiritual exercises, then, which resemble moral exercises like a twin, both in essence and structure, were raised to their classical rigor and perfection in the *Exercitia spiritualia* of Ignatius of Loyola. Spiritual exercises thus belong properly to the religious sphere, since their goal is to fortify, maintain, and renew life “in the Spirit,” the *vita spiritualis*.<sup>6</sup>

Christian spiritual exercises did indeed take on a new meaning by virtue of the specific character of Christian spirituality, inspired as it is by the death of Christ and the Trinitarian life of the divine Persons. But to speak, apropos of the philosophical exercises of antiquity, of simple “moral exercises” is to misunderstand their importance and significance. As we showed above, these exercises have as their goal the transformation of our vision of the world, and the metamorphosis of our being. They therefore have not merely a moral, but also an existential value. We are not just dealing here with a code of good moral conduct, but with a *way of being*, in the strongest sense of the term. In the last analysis, then, the term “spiritual exercises” is the best one, because it leaves no doubt that we are dealing with exercises which engage the totality of the spirit.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, one gets the impression from reading Rabbow that Ignatius of Loyola rediscovered spiritual exercises thanks to the sixteenth-century renaissance of rhetorical studies.<sup>8</sup> In fact, however, rhetoric for the ancients was only one of many ingredients of exercises which were first and foremost *philosophical* in the strict sense of the term. Moreover, ever since the first centuries of the church’s existence, Christian spirituality has been the heir of ancient philosophy and its spiritual practices. There was thus nothing to prevent Ignatius from finding the methodology for his *Exercitia* within the Christian tradition itself. In the following pages, we hope to show, with the help of a few quotations, in what way ancient spiritual exercises were preserved and transmitted by an entire current of ancient Christian thought: that current, namely, which defined Christianity itself as a philosophy.

Before we begin our study, we must be more specific about the notion of spiritual exercises. "Exercise" corresponds to the Greek terms *askesis* or *melete*. Let us be clear at the outset about the limits of the present inquiry: we shall not be discussing "asceticism" in the modern sense of the word, as it is defined, for instance, by Heussi: "Complete abstinence or restriction in the use of food, drink, sleep, dress, and property, and especially continence in sexual matters."<sup>9</sup> Here, we must carefully distinguish between two different phenomena. On the one hand, there is the Christian – and subsequently modern – use of the word "asceticism", as we have just seen it defined. On the other, there is use of the word *askesis* in ancient philosophy. For ancient philosophers, the word *askesis* designated exclusively the spiritual exercises we have discussed above:<sup>10</sup> inner activities of the thought and the will. Whether or not sexual or alimentary practices analogous to those of Christian asceticism existed among certain ancient philosophers – the Cynics, for example, or the Neoplatonists – is a wholly different question. Such practices have nothing to do with philosophical thought-exercises. This question has been competently dealt with by many authors,<sup>11</sup> who have shown both the analogies and the differences between asceticism (in the modern sense of the word) in ancient philosophy and in Christianity. What we propose to examine here is rather the way in which *askesis*, in the *philosophical* sense of the term, was received into Christianity.

In order to understand the phenomenon under consideration, it is essential to recall that there was a widespread Christian tradition which portrayed Christianity as a *philosophy*. This assimilation began with those Christian writers of the second century who are usually referred to as the Apologists, and in particular with Justin. The Apologists considered Christianity a philosophy, and to mark its opposition to Greek philosophy, they spoke of Christianity as "our philosophy" or as "Barbarian philosophy."<sup>12</sup> They did not, however, consider Christianity to be just one philosophy among others; they thought of it as *the* philosophy. They believed that that which had been scattered and dispersed throughout Greek philosophy had been synthesized and systematized in Christian philosophy. Each Greek philosopher, they wrote, had possessed only a portion of the *Logos*,<sup>13</sup> whereas the Christians were in possession of the *Logos* itself, incarnated in Jesus Christ. If to do philosophy was to live in accordance with the law of reason, then the Christians were philosophers, since they lived in conformity with the law of the divine *Logos*.<sup>14</sup>

Clement of Alexandria dwells at length on this theme. He establishes a close link between philosophy and *paideia*, by which he means the education of mankind. Already within Greek philosophy, the *Logos*, or divine pedagogue, had been at work educating humanity, but Christianity itself, as the complete revelation of the *Logos*, was the true philosophy<sup>15</sup> which "teaches us to conduct ourselves so that we may resemble God, and to accept the divine plan [*teleiōmi*] as the guiding principle of all our education."<sup>16</sup>

The identification of Christianity with true philosophy inspired many aspects of the teaching of Origen, and it remained influential throughout the Origenist tradition, especially among the Cappadocian Fathers: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa. It is also in evidence in John Chrysostom.<sup>17</sup> All these authors speak of "our philosophy"; of the "complete philosophy"; or of "the philosophy according to Christ."

We may well ask ourselves if such an identification was legitimate, and wonder whether it did not contribute to a large extent to the notorious "Hellenization" of Christianity, about which so much has been written. I will not go into this complex problem here, but shall limit myself to pointing out that in portraying Christianity as a philosophy, this tradition was the heir – almost certainly consciously so – of a tendency already at work in the Jewish tradition, particularly in Philo of Alexandria.<sup>18</sup> Philo portrayed Judaism as a *patrios philosophia*: the traditional philosophy of the Jewish people. The same terminology was used by Flavius Josephus.<sup>19</sup>

When, a few centuries later, monasticism came to represent the culmination of Christian perfection, it, too, could be portrayed as a *philosophia*. From the fourth century on, this is exactly how it was in fact described, by church Fathers such as Gregory Nazianzen,<sup>20</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom,<sup>21</sup> and especially by Evagrius Ponticus.<sup>22</sup> This viewpoint was still current in the fifth century, for instance in Theodoret of Cyrthus.<sup>23</sup>

Here again, it was Philo of Alexandria who had shown the way. He had given the name "philosophers" to the Therapeutae, who, according to his description,<sup>24</sup> lived in solitude, meditating on the law and devoting themselves to contemplation. Jean Leclercq<sup>25</sup> has shown that, under the influence of Greek tradition, the monastic life continued to be designated by the term *philosophia* throughout the Middle Ages. Thus, a Cistercian monastic text tells us that Bernard of Clairvaux used to initiate his disciples "into the disciplines of celestial philosophy."<sup>26</sup> Finally, John of Salisbury maintained that it was the monks who "philosophized" in the most correct and authentic way.<sup>27</sup>

The importance of this assimilation between Christianity and philosophy cannot be over-emphasized. Let us be clear on one point, however: there can be no question of denying the incomparable originality of Christianity. We shall return to this point later; in particular, we shall emphasize the specifically Christian character of this "philosophy," as well as the care Christians have taken to connect it with the biblical/evangelical tradition. Moreover, the tendency to assimilation was confined within strict historical limits, and always linked more or less closely to the tradition of the Apologists and of Origen. This tendency did, however, exist; its importance was considerable, and its result was the introduction of philosophical spiritual exercises into Christianity.

Along with its absorption of spiritual exercises, Christianity acquired a specific style of life, spiritual attitude, and tonality, which had been absent

from primitive Christianity. This fact is highly significant: it shows that if Christianity was able to be assimilated to a philosophy, the reason was that philosophy itself was already, above all else, a way of being and a style of life. As Jean Leclercq points out: "In the monastic Middle Ages, just as much as in Antiquity, *philosophia* did not designate a theory or a means of knowledge, but a lived, experienced wisdom, and a way of living according to reason."<sup>28</sup>

We remarked above<sup>29</sup> that the fundamental attitude of the Stoic philosopher was *prosoche*: attention to oneself and vigilance at every instant. For the Stoics, the person who is "awake"<sup>30</sup> is always perfectly conscious not only of what he *does*, but of what he *is*. In other words, he is aware of his place in the universe and of his relationship to God. His self-consciousness is, first and foremost, a moral consciousness.

A person endowed with such consciousness seeks to purify and rectify his intentions at every instant. He is constantly on the lookout for signs within himself of any motive for action other than the will to do good. Such self-consciousness is not, however, merely a moral conscience; it is also cosmic consciousness. The "attentive" person lives constantly in the presence of God and is constantly remembering God, joyfully consenting to the will of universal reason, and he sees all things with the eyes of God himself.

Such is the philosophical attitude *par excellence*. It is also the attitude of the Christian philosopher. We encounter this attitude already in Clement of Alexandria, in a passage which foreshadows the spirit which was later to reign in philosophically-inspired monasticism: "It is necessary that divine law inspire fear, so that the philosopher may acquire and conserve peace of mind [*lanemina*], by dint of prudence [*eulabeia*] and attention to himself [*prosoche*], and that he may remain exempt from sins and falls in all things."<sup>31</sup> For Clement, the divine law is simultaneously the universal reason of the philosophers, and the divine word of the Christians. It inspires fear, not in the sense of a passion – which, as such, would be condemned by the Stoics – but rather in the sense of a certain circumspection in thought and action. Such attention to oneself brings about *anemina* or peace of mind, one of the most sought-after goals in monasticism.

Attention to oneself is the subject of a very important sermon by Basil of Caesarea.<sup>32</sup> Basil bases his sermon on the Greek version of a passage from *Deuteronomy*: "Give heed to yourself, lest there be a hidden word in your heart."<sup>33</sup> On this basis, Basil develops an entire theory of *prosoche*, strongly influenced by the Stoic and Platonic traditions. We shall return to this point later. For the moment, let us simply note that Basil's reason for commenting on this particular passage of *Deuteronomy* is that, for him, it evokes a technical term of ancient philosophy. For Basil, attention to oneself consists in awakening the rational principles of thought and action which God has placed in our souls.<sup>34</sup> We are to watch over *ourselves* – that is, over our spirit and our soul – and not over that which is *ours* (our body) or that which is *round about*

us (our possessions).<sup>35</sup> Thus, *prosoche* consists in paying attention to the beauty of our souls, by constantly renewing the examination of our conscience and our knowledge of ourselves.<sup>36</sup> By so doing, we can correct the judgments we bring upon ourselves. If we think we are rich and noble, we are to recall that we are made of earth, and ask ourselves where are the famous men who have preceded us now. If, on the contrary, we are poor and in disgrace, we are to take cognizance of the riches and splendors which the cosmos offers us: our body, the earth, the sky, and the stars, and we shall then be reminded of our divine vocation.<sup>36</sup> It is not hard to recognize the philosophical character of these themes.

*Prosoche* or attention<sup>37</sup> to oneself, the philosopher's fundamental attitude, became the fundamental attitude of the monk. We can observe this phenomenon in Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, written in AD 357. When describing the saint's conversion to the monastic life, Athanasius simply says: "He began to *pay attention to himself*."<sup>38</sup> Antony himself, we read later, is supposed to have said to his disciples on his deathbed: "Live as though you were dying every day, *paying heed to yourselves* [*prosochontes heautois*] and remembering what you heard from my preaching."<sup>39</sup>

In the sixth century, Dorotheus of Gaza remarked: "We are so negligent that we do not know why we have gone out of the world . . . That is why we are not making progress. . . . The reason for it is that there is no *prosoche* in our hearts."<sup>40</sup> As we have seen,<sup>41</sup> attention and vigilance presuppose continuous concentration on the present moment, which must be lived as if it were, simultaneously, the first and last moment of life. Athanasius tells us that Antony used to make no attempt to remember the time he had already spent at his exercises, but rather made a brand new effort every day, as if starting afresh from zero.<sup>42</sup> In other words, he lived the present moment as if it were his first, but also his last. We also saw that Antony told his disciples to "Live as though you were dying every day."<sup>43</sup> Athanasius reports another of Antony's sayings: "If we live as if we were going to die each day, we will not commit sin."<sup>44</sup> We are to wake up thinking it possible that we may not make it until the evening, and go to sleep thinking that we shall not wake up.<sup>45</sup> Epictetus had spoken along similar lines: "Let death be before your eyes every day, and you will never have any abject thought nor excessive desire."<sup>46</sup>

In the same vein, Marcus Aurelius wrote: "Let your every deed and word and thought be those of one who might depart from this life this very moment."<sup>47</sup> Dorotheus of Gaza also established a close link between *prosoche* and the imminence of death: "Let us pay heed to ourselves, brothers, and be vigilant while we still have time. . . . Look! Since the time we sat down at this conference we have used up two or three hours of our time and got that much nearer to death. Yet though we see that we are losing time, we are not afraid!"<sup>48</sup> And again: "Let us pay heed to ourselves and be vigilant, brothers. Who will give us back the present time if we waste it?"<sup>49</sup>

Attention to the present is simultaneously control of one's thoughts, acceptance of the divine will, and the purification of one's intentions with regard to others. We have an excellent summary of this constant attention to the present in a well-known *Meditation* of Marcus Aurelius:

Everywhere and at all times, it is up to you to rejoice piously at what is occurring *at the present moment*, to conduct yourself with justice towards the people who are *present here and now*, and to apply rules of discernment [*epiphilekheinai*] to your *present* representations [*phantasiai*], so that nothing slips in that is not objective.<sup>50</sup>

We encounter the same continuous vigilance over both thought and intentions in monastic spirituality, where it is transformed into the "watch of the heart,"<sup>51</sup> also known as *nepsis*<sup>52</sup> or vigilance. We are not dealing here with a mere exercise of the moral conscience. Rather, *prosoche* relocates man within his genuine being: that is, his relationship to God. It is thus equivalent to the continuous exercise of the presence of God. In the words of Plotinus' disciple Porphyry: "Let God be present as overseer and guardian of every action, deed and word!"<sup>53</sup> Here we have one of the fundamental themes of philosophical *prosoche*: presence both to God and to oneself.

"Have your joy and your rest in one thing only: in progressing from one action done for the sake of others to another such act, always accompanied by the remembrance of God."<sup>54</sup> This *Meditation* of Marcus Aurelius has to do, once again, with the theme of exercises invoking the presence of God. At the same time, it introduces to us an expression which was later to play an important role in monastic spirituality. The "remembrance of God" is a perpetual reference to God at each instant of life. Basil of Caesarea links it explicitly with the "watch of the heart": "We must keep watch over our heart with all vigilance . . . to avoid ever losing the thought of God."<sup>55</sup> Diadochus of Photice often evokes this theme. For him, the remembrance of God is entirely equivalent to *prosoche*: "Only they know their failures who never let their intellects be distracted from the remembrance of God."<sup>56</sup> "Since then [i.e. since its fall], it is only with difficulty that the human intellect can remember God and His commandments."<sup>57</sup> We are to

close off all the intellect's avenues of escape, by means of the remembrance of God.<sup>58</sup>

What distinguishes a man who is virtue's friend is that he constantly consumes everything that is earthly in his heart by means of the remembrance of God, so that, bit by bit, the evil in it is dispersed by the fire of the remembrance of the Good, and his soul

returns in perfection to its natural brilliance; nay, even with increased splendor.<sup>59</sup>

Clearly, remembrance of God is, in some sense, the very essence of *prosoche*. It is the most radical method for ensuring one's presence to God and to oneself.<sup>60</sup> Vague intentions, however, are not sufficient for true attention to one's self. We noted that Diadochus of Photice speaks of the "remembrance of God and of His commandments." In ancient philosophy as well, *prosoche* required meditating on and memorizing rules of life (*kanoon*), those principles which were to be applied in each particular circumstance, at each moment in life. It was essential to have the principles of life, the fundamental "dogmas," constantly "at hand."

We encounter this same theme once again in the monastic tradition. Here, however, philosophical dogmas are replaced by the Commandments as an evangelical rule of life, and the words of Christ, enunciating the principles of Christian life. Yet the rule of life could be inspired not only by the evangelical commandments, but also by the words of the "ancients," in other words, of the first monks. We have only to recall Antony, on his deathbed, recommending that his disciples remember his exhortations.<sup>61</sup> Evagrius Ponticus declares: "It is a very necessary thing . . . to examine carefully the ways of the monks who have traveled, in an earlier age, straight along the road and to direct oneself along the same paths."<sup>62</sup>

Both the evangelical commandments and the words of the ancients were presented in the form of short sentences, which – just as in the philosophical tradition – could be easily memorized and meditated upon. The numerous collections of *Aphrothegmata* and of *Kephalaia* we find in monastic literature are a response to this need for memorization and meditation. *Aphrothegmata*<sup>63</sup> were the famous sayings which the ancients – that is to say, the Desert Fathers – pronounced in specific circumstances. This literary genre was already in existence in the philosophical tradition, and we find numerous examples of it in the works of Diogenes Laertius. As for *Kephalaia*,<sup>64</sup> these are collections of relatively short sentences, usually grouped into "centuries." This, too, was a literary genre much in vogue in traditional philosophical literature: some examples are Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* and Porphyry's *Sentences*. Both these literary genres are responses to the requirements of meditation.

Like philosophical meditation, Christian meditation flourished by using all available means of rhetoric and oratorical amplification, and by mobilizing all possible resources of the imagination. Thus, for example, Evagrius Ponticus used to invite his disciples to imagine their own death, the decomposition of their bodies, the terrors and sufferings of their souls in Hell, and eternal fire; then, by way of contrast, they were to picture the happiness of the just.<sup>65</sup>

Meditation must, in any case, be constant. Dorotheus of Gaza insists strongly on this point:

Meditate constantly on this advice in your hearts, Brothers. Study the words of the holy Elders.<sup>66</sup>

If we remember the sayings of the holy Elders, brothers, and meditate on them constantly, it will be difficult for us to sin.<sup>67</sup>

If you wish to possess these sayings at the opportune moment, meditate on them constantly.<sup>68</sup>

In the spiritual life, there is a kind of conspiracy between, on the one hand, normative sayings, which are memorized and meditated upon, and, on the other, the events which provide the occasion for putting them into practice. Dorotheus of Gaza promised his monks that, if they constantly meditated on the “works of the holy Elders,” they would “be able to profit from everything that happens to you, and to make progress by the help of God.”<sup>69</sup> Dorotheus no doubt meant that after such meditation, his monks would be able to recognize the will of God in all events, thanks to the words of the Fathers, which were likewise inspired by the will of God.

Vigilance and self-attention clearly presuppose the practice of examining one’s conscience. We have already seen, in the case of Basil of Caesarea,<sup>70</sup> the close link between *prosoche* and the examination of conscience. It seems that the practice of the examination of the conscience occurs for the first time, within the Christian tradition, in Origen’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*.<sup>71</sup> In the course of his interpretation of verse 1: 8, “Unless thou know thyself, O fair one among women,”<sup>72</sup> Origen explains that the soul must examine its feelings and actions. Does it have the good as a goal? Does it seek after the various virtues? Is it making progress? For instance, has it completely suppressed the passions of anger, sadness, fear, and love of glory? What is its manner of giving and receiving, or of judging the truth?

This series of questions, devoid as it is of any exclusively Christian feature, takes its place in the philosophical tradition of the examination of conscience, as it had been recommended by the Pythagoreans, the Epicureans, the Stoics – especially Seneca and Epictetus – and many other philosophers, such as Plutarch and Galen.<sup>73</sup> We find the practice recommended again by John Chrysostom,<sup>74</sup> and especially by Dorotheus of Gaza:

We ought not only to examine ourselves every day but also every season, every month, and every week, and ask ourselves: “What stage am I at now with regards to the passion by which I was overcome last week?”

Similarly every year: “Last year I was overcome by such and such a passion, how about now?”

The Fathers have told us how useful it is for each of us to purify himself in turn, by examining, every evening, how we have spent the day, and every morning, how we have spent the night. . . . Truly, however, we who sin so much and are so forgetful, really need to examine ourselves every six hours also, so that we may know how we have spent these hours and in what way we have sinned.<sup>75</sup>

In this regard there is an interesting detail in Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*. According to his biographer, Antony used to recommend to his disciples that they take written notes of the actions and movements of their souls. It is possible that written examinations of conscience were already part of the philosophical tradition;<sup>76</sup> they would have been useful, if not necessary, in order to ensure that the investigation was as precise as possible. For Antony, however, the important aspect was the therapeutic value of writing: “Let each one of us note and record our actions and the strings of our souls as though we were going to give an account of them to each other.”<sup>77</sup> Surely, he continues, we would not dare to commit sins in public, in full view of others: “Let this record replace the eyes of our fellow ascetics.” According to Antony, the act of writing gives us the impression of being in public, in front of an audience. We can also discern the therapeutic value of writing in a passage in which Dorotheus of Gaza reports that he felt “help and relief”<sup>78</sup> by the mere fact of having written to his spiritual director.

Another interesting psychological point: Plato and Zeno had remarked that the quality of our dreams allows us to judge the spiritual state of our soul.<sup>79</sup> We find this observation repeated by Evagrius Ponticus<sup>80</sup> and Diadochus of Phocis.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, *prosoche* implies self-mastery. That is, it implies the triumph of reason over the passions, since it is the passions that cause the distraction, dispersion, and dissipation of the soul. Monastic literature insists tirelessly on the misdeeds of the passions, which were often personalized in demoniacal form.

Many recollections of ancient philosophy were preserved in monastic exercises of self-mastery. For instance, we find Dorotheus of Gaza, like Epictetus, advising his disciples to begin by training themselves in little things, so as to create a habit,<sup>82</sup> before moving on to greater things. Similarly, he advises them to diminish the number of their sins bit by bit, in order to defeat a passion.<sup>83</sup> We find Evagrius Ponticus proposing that one passion ought to be combated by means of another – fornication, for instance, by the concern for one’s good reputation – as long as it remains impossible to combat the passion directly by the virtue which is opposed to it. This was the method already suggested by Cicero in his *Tusculan Disputations*.<sup>84</sup>

We said above that Christianity's acceptance of spiritual exercises had introduced into it a certain spiritual attitude and style of life which it had previously lacked. As an example, let us consider the concept of exercises as a whole. In the very process of performing repetitious actions and undergoing a training in order to modify and transform ourselves, there is a certain reflectivity and distance which is very different from evangelical spontaneity. Attention to oneself – the essence of *prosoche* – gives rise to a whole series of techniques of introspection. It engenders an extraordinary finesse in the examination of conscience and spiritual discernment. Most significantly, the ideal sought after in these exercises, and the goals proposed for the spiritual life, became tinged with a strong Stoico-Platonic coloration; that is to say, since by the end of antiquity Neoplatonism had integrated Stoic ethics within itself, that they were deeply infused with Neoplatonism. This is the case, for instance, in Dorotheus of Gaza, who describes spiritual perfection in completely Stoic terms: it is the transformation of the will so that it becomes identified with the Divine Will:

He who has no will of his own always does what he wishes. For since he has no will of his own, everything that happens satisfies him. He finds himself doing as he wills all the time, for he does not want things to be as he wills them, but he wills that they be just as they are.<sup>85</sup>

The most recent editors of Dorotheus compare this text with a passage from the *Manual* of Epictetus: "Do not seek to have everything that happens happen as you wish, but wish for everything to happen as it actually does happen, and your life will be serene."<sup>86</sup>

Spiritual perfection is also depicted as *apatheia* – the complete absence of passions – a Stoic concept taken up by Neoplatonism. For Dorotheus of Gaza, *apatheia* is the end-result of the annihilation of one's own will: "From this cutting off of self-will a man procures for himself detachment [*aprospathia*], and from detachment he comes, with the help of God, to perfect *apatheia*."<sup>87</sup> We may note in passing that the means Dorotheus recommends for cutting off self-will are wholly identical to the exercises of self-mastery of the philosophical tradition. In order to cure curiosity, for instance, Plutarch advised people not to read funeral epitaphs, not to snoop on their neighbors, and to turn their backs on street scenes.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Dorotheus advises us *not* to look in the direction where we *want* to look; not to ask the cook what he's preparing for dinner; and not to join in a conversation we find already underway.<sup>89</sup> This is what Dorotheus means by "cutting off self-will."

It is with Evagrius, however, that we can see most clearly just how closely Christian *apatheia* can be linked to philosophical concepts. In Evagrius' *Praktikos*, we find the following definition: "The Kingdom of Heaven is *apatheia* of the soul along with true knowledge of existing things."<sup>90</sup> When

we turn to comment on a formula such as this, we find how great is the distance separating such speculations from the evangelical spirit. As we know, the evangelical message consisted in the announcement of an eschatological event called "the Kingdom of Heaven" or "the Kingdom of God." Evagrius begins by differentiating between the two expressions, and interpreting them in a highly personal way. Enlarging upon the Origenist tradition,<sup>91</sup> he considers that the two expressions designate two inner states of the soul. More precisely, they designate two stages of spiritual progress:

The Kingdom of Heaven is *apatheia* of the soul along with true knowledge of existing things.

The Kingdom of God is knowledge of the Holy Trinity co-extensive with the capacity of the intelligence and giving it a surpassing incorruptibility.<sup>92</sup>

Two levels of knowledge are distinguished here: the knowledge of beings and the knowledge of God. We then realize that this distinction corresponds exactly to a division of the parts of philosophy which was well known to Origen, and is attested in Platonism at least since the time of Plutarch.<sup>93</sup> In this division, three separate stages or levels of spiritual progress are distinguished, which correspond to the three parts of philosophy: ethics – or "practices," as Evagrius calls it – physics, and theology. Ethics corresponds to initial purification, physics to definitive detachment from the sensible world and contemplation of the order of nature; finally, theology corresponds to contemplation of the principle of all things. According to the Evagian schema, however, ethics corresponds to *praktike*, physics to "the Kingdom of Heaven," which includes the true knowledge of beings, and theology corresponds to "the Kingdom of God," which is the knowledge of the Trinity. In Neoplatonic systematization, these degrees also correspond to degrees of virtue. According to Porphyry,<sup>94</sup> the soul begins by utilizing the *political* virtues to dominate the passions *via* the state of *metriopatheia*. It then rises to the level of the *kathartik* virtues. These virtues begin to detach the soul from the body, but do not yet do so completely; this is only the beginning of *apatheia*. Not until the level of the *theoretical* virtues does the soul attain to full *apatheia* and perfect separation from the body. It is at this level that the soul is able to contemplate the forms within the divine intellect, which are the models for the phenomenal world.<sup>95</sup> This level, characterized by *apatheia* and the contemplation of existents, corresponds to Evagrius' "Kingdom of Heaven." According to Evagrius, the soul now contemplates the multiplicity of *physis* ("natures"); hence the denomination "physical": on the one hand, the intelligible forms, and on the other the *logoi* of sensible beings.<sup>96</sup> The final stage, noetic in nature, is the contemplation of God Himself. Thus, Evagrius sums up his thought in these terms: "Christianity is

the doctrine of Christ our Savior. It is composed of *praktike*, of physics, and of theology."<sup>97</sup>

*Apatheia* plays an essential role, not only in theoretical constructions such as Evagrius metaphysics, but also in monastic spirituality. There, its value is closely linked to that of peace of mind and absence of worry: *anemimata*<sup>98</sup> or *tranquillitas*.<sup>99</sup> Dorotheus of Gaza<sup>100</sup> does not hesitate to declare that peace of mind is so important that one must, if necessary, drop what one has undertaken if one's peace of mind is endangered. Peace of mind – *tranquillitas animi* – had, moreover, always been a central value within the philosophical tradition.<sup>101</sup>

For Porphyry, as we have seen, *apathéia* was a result of the soul's detachment from the body. Here we touch once again upon the philosophical exercise *par excellence*. As we saw above, Plato had declared: "those who go about philosophizing correctly are in training for death."<sup>102</sup> As late as the seventh century, we still find the echo of this saying in Maximus Confessor: "In conformity with the philosophy of Christ, let us make of our life a training for death."<sup>103</sup>

Yet Maximus himself is only the inheritor of a rich tradition, which repeatedly identified Christian philosophy with training for death. We encounter this theme already in Clement of Alexandria,<sup>104</sup> who understood such training in a thoroughly Platonic sense, as the attempt spiritually to separate the soul from the body. For Clement, perfect knowledge, or *gnosis*, is a kind of death. It separates the soul from the body, and promotes the soul to a life entirely devoted to the good, allowing it to devote itself to the contemplation of genuine realities with a purified mind. Again, the same motif recurs in Gregory Nazianzen: "Make of this life, as Plato said, a training for death, while to speak in his terms – separating the soul from the body as far as possible."<sup>105</sup> "This," he tells us, "is the practice of philosophy." Evagrius, for his part, expresses himself in terms strikingly similar to Porphyry's:

To separate the body from the soul is the privilege only of Him who has joined them together. But to separate the soul from the body lies as well in the power of the person who pursues virtue. For our Fathers gave to the training for death and to the flight from the body a special name: *anachoresis* [i.e. the monastic life].<sup>106</sup>

It is easy to see that the Platonic concept of the flight from the body, which exercised such an attraction upon the young Augustine, was an element *added on* to Christianity, and not essential to it. Nevertheless, this concept determined the orientation of the whole of Christian spirituality in a quite specific direction.

So far, we have noted the permanent survival of certain philosophical spiritual exercises in Christianity and monasticism, and we have tried to make

comprehensible the particular tonality that their reception introduced into Christianity. We must not, however, exaggerate the importance of this phenomenon. In the first place, as we have said, it manifested itself only in a rather restricted circle: among Christian writers who had received a philosophical education. Even in their case, however, the final synthesis is essentially Christian.

To be sure, our authors strove to Christianize their borrowings as much as possible; but this is perhaps the least important aspect of the matter. They believed they recognized spiritual exercises, which they had learned through philosophy, in specific scriptural passages. Thus, we saw Basil of Caesarea making a connection between *prosoche* and a text from Deuteronomy.<sup>107</sup> Then, in Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, and throughout monastic literature, *prosoche* was transformed into the "watch of the heart," under the influence of *Proverbs*, 4:23: "Above all else, guard your heart."<sup>108</sup> Examination of one's conscience was often justified by the *Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 13:5: "Examine yourselves... and test yourselves."<sup>109</sup> Finally, the meditation on death was recommended on the basis of *First Corinthians*, 15: 31: "I die every day."<sup>110</sup>

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to believe that these references were enough, all by themselves, to Christianize spiritual exercises. The reason why Christian authors paid attention to these particular biblical passages was that they were *already* familiar, from other sources, with the spiritual exercises of *prosoche*, meditation on death, and examination of the conscience. By themselves, the texts from scripture could never have supplied a method for practicing these exercises. Often, in fact, a given scriptural passage has only a distant connection with a particular spiritual exercise.

More important is the overall spirit in which Christian and monastic spiritual exercises were practiced. They always presupposed the assistance of God's grace, and they made of humility the most important of virtues. In the words of Dorotheus of Gaza: "The closer one comes to God, the more one sees oneself as a sinner."<sup>111</sup> Such humility makes us consider ourselves inferior to others. It leads us to maintain the greatest reserve in both conduct and speech, and to adopt certain significant bodily positions, for instance prostration before other monks.

Two other fundamental virtues were penitence and obedience. Penitence, inspired by the fear and love of God, could take the form of extremely severe self-mortification. The remembrance of death was intended not only to make people realize the urgency of conversion, but also to develop the fear of God. In turn, it is linked to meditation on the Last Judgment, and thereby to the virtue of penitence. The same holds true of the examination of conscience.

Obedience – the renunciation of one's own will, in complete submission to the orders of a superior – completely transformed the philosophical practice of spiritual direction. We can see to just what extremes such obedience could

be taken in Dorotheus' *Life of Dositheus*.<sup>112</sup> The director of conscience had an absolute power of decision over his disciple's possessions, eating habits, and entire way of life.

In the final analysis, all these virtues were transfigured by the transcendent dimension of the love of God and of Christ. Thus, to train for death, or to separate the soul from the body, was at the same time to participate in the death of Christ. To renounce one's will was to adhere to divine love.

Generally speaking, we can say that monasticism in Egypt and Syria<sup>113</sup> was born and developed in a Christian milieu, spontaneously and without the intervention of a philosophical model. The first monks were not cultivated men, but Christians who wanted to attain to Christian perfection by the heroic practice of the evangelical prescriptions, and the imitation of the Life of Christ. It was, therefore, natural that they should seek their techniques of perfection in the Old and the New Testament. Under Alexandrian influence, however – the distant influence of Philo, and the more immediate influence of Origen and Clement of Alexandria, magnificently orchestrated by the Cappadocians – certain philosophical spiritual techniques were introduced into Christian spirituality. The result of this was that the Christian ideal was described, and, in part, practiced, by borrowing models and vocabulary from the Greek philosophical tradition. Thanks to its literary and philosophical qualities, this tendency became dominant, and it was through its agency that the heritage of ancient spiritual exercises was transmitted to Christian spirituality: first to that of the Middle Ages, and subsequently to that of modern times.

#### NOTES

- 1 See above.
- 2 See above.
- 3 Paul Rabbow, *Seelenführung. Methodik der Exerzitien in der Antike*, Munich 1954, p. 23.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 See above.
- 8 Rabbow, *Seelenführung* p. 301, n. 5; p. 306, nn. 14, 17.
- 9 K. Heussi, *Der Ursprung des Monachiums*, Tübingen 1936, p. 13.
- 10 See above.
- 11 For example, G. Kreischar, "Der Ursprung der fruchtbaren Askese," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 61 (1964), pp. 27–67; P. Nagel, *Die Mönche – rung der Askese in der alten Kirche und der Ursprung des Monachiums* (= Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der alchristlichen Literatur 95), Berlin 1966; B. Lohse, *Askese und Monachium in der Antike und in der alten Kirche*.

Munich/Vienna 1969; K.S. Frank, ed., *Askese und Monachium in der alten Kirche* (= Wege der Forschung 409), Darmstadt 1975; R. Hauser and G. Janekowski, "Askese," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 1, cols 538–41, 1971 (with good bibliography); J. de Guibert, "Ascèse," in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 1, cols 936–1010.

- 12 Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 8, 1; Tarian, *Address to the Greeks*, 31, 35, 55; Melito in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4, 26, 7.
- 13 Justin, *Second Apology*, 2, 13, 3; Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 7, 7, 7; "If someone had arisen who could collect the truth scattered and dispersed among the individual philosophers and sects and reduce it to one body, that one . . . would not disagree with us", 7, 8, 3; "We . . . are able to pick out the truth by sure signs; we who gather it, not from fluctuating suspicion, but who know it from divine tradition."
- 14 Justin, *Apology*, 1, 46, 1–4.
- 15 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 1, 13, 57, 1–58, 5; 1, 5, 28, 1–32, 4.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 1, 11, 52, 3.
- 17 Most of the relevant texts have been assembled in A.N. Malingrey, "Philosophia," *Étude d'un groupe de mots dans la littérature grecque, des Présocratiques au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle ap. J.-C.*, Paris 1961.
- 18 Philo Judaeus, *The Legation to Gaius*, 156; 345; *Life of Moses*, 2, 216; *On the Contemplative Life*, 26.
- 19 Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18, 11; 23.
- 20 Gregory Nazianzen, *Apologética*, 103, PG 35, 504A.
- 21 John Chrysostom, *Against the Opponents of the Monastic Life*, 3, 13, PG 47, col. 372.
- 22 See below.
- 23 Theodoret of Cyrthus, *History of the Monks of Syria*, 2, 3, 1; 4, 1, 9; 4, 2, 19; 4, 10, 15; 6, 13, 1; 8, 2, 3 Canvet.
- 24 Philo Judaeus, *On the Contemplative Life*, 2, 30.
- 25 J. Leclercq, "Pour l'histoire de l'expression 'philosophie chrétienne,'" *Mélanges de Science Religieuse* 9 (1952), pp. 221–6.
- 26 *Exordium magnam Gisteriense*, PL 185, 437.
- 27 John of Salisbury, *Polycratias*, 7, 21, PL 199, 696.
- 28 Leclercq "Pour l'histoire," p. 221.
- 29 See above.
- 30 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 2, 20, 120, 1.
- 31 Basil of Caesarea, *In Illud Attende tibi ipse*, PG 31, cols 197–217. P. Adriaes, "Garde du cœur," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 6, col. 108, points to the existence of a multitude of sermons relating to this theme. He cites C. Baur, *Initia Patrum Graecorum* (= Studi e Testi 181, 2), Vatican City 1955, p. 374.
- 32 *Deuteronomy*, 15: 9. [The Septuagint Greek version of the Bible renders this phrase as *proseche seautoi me genetai rhema keyrion en tet kardai sou*: "Pay attention to yourself, lest a hidden word come to be in your heart," which the King James Version renders as "Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart." The Greek title of Basil's sermon is consequently *eis to Proseche seautoi*: "On the words, 'Give heed to yourself'". – Trans.]

- 33 Basil, *In Illud attende*, 2, 201B, pp. 433–4 Wagner.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 3, 204A, p. 435 Wagner. This distinction was current in Platonic circles; cf. Plato, *First Alcibiades*, 130. *Id.*: *Psychology*, 36b4–c6.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 3, 204B; 5, 209B, pp. 435, 440 Wagner.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 5–6, 209C–213A, pp. 440–2 Wagner.
- 37 On the following exercises, the reader may consult the following articles in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*: “Attention,” “Apathéia,” “Contemplation,” “Examen de Conscience,” “Direction spirituelle,” “Exercices spirituels,” “Garde du coeur.”
- 38 *Prosechon heautoi*. Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 3, PG 26, 844B, p. 32 Gregg.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 91, 969B, p. 97 Gregg.
- 40 Dorotheus of Gaza, *Didaskaliai*, 10, §104, line 9 Regnault/de Préville = p. 163 Wheeler. The concept of *proseche* plays a very important role throughout the monastic tradition; cf. for instance Diadochus of Photice, *Kephalaia Gnostica*, §27, p. 98, 19 Des Places.
- 41 See above.
- 42 Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 853A; 868A; 969B; pp. 37, 43, 97 Gregg/Clebsch.
- 43 Cf. above.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 19, 872A, p. 45 Gregg/Clebsch.
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 Epictetus, *Manual*, 21. See above.
- 47 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2, 11.
- 48 Dorotheus of Gaza, *Didaskaliai*, §114, 1–15 Regnault/de Préville = p. 173 Wheeler.
- 49 *Ibid.*, §104, 1–3 Regnault/de Préville = p. 163 Wheeler.
- 50 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 7, 54.
- 51 Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 873C; Basil of Caesarea, *Regulae fuisus tractatae*, PG 31, 921 B = p. 243 Wagner. Cf. John Cassian, *Collations*, vol. 1, p. 84 Pichery = p. 84 Iuthheid: “we must practice the reading of the Scripture, together with all the other virtuous activities, and we do so to *trap and to hold our hearts* free of the harm of every dangerous passion.” [Basil and Athanasius use the term *phulake*, among whose many meanings are “protection,” “control,” “guarding,” and “observance.” It can also mean a prison or a prisoner. Originally, however, *phulake* meant a night-watch or the person charged with this duty (the Latin *custodius*), and this is the meaning I have tried to convey by translating *he tes kardias phulake* by “watch of the heart.” All the other meanings, however, are relevant and should be borne in mind. Trans.]
- 52 Dorotheus of Gaza, *Didaskaliai*, §104 Regnault/de Préville = p. 163 Wheeler.
- 53 Porphyry, *Porphyry the Philosopher, To Marcella*, 12.
- 54 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 6, 7.
- 55 Basil, *In Illud attende*, p. 243 Wagner.
- 56 Diadochus of Photice, *Kephalaia Gnostica*, 27, p. 98, 11 Des Places.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 56, p. 117, 15.
- 58 *Ibid.*, 59, p. 119, 1–2.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 97, p. 160, 3.
- 60 On the theme of presence, see above.

- 61 See above.
- 62 Evagrius of Pontus, *Praktikos*, §91, p. 91 Bamberger.
- 63 Cf. T. Klausner, “Apophthegmata,” *Rechtlexikon für Antike und Christentum* 1 (1950), pp. 545–50.
- 64 Cf. E. von Ivanka, “Kephalaia,” *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 47 (1954), pp. 258–91.
- 65 *Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 173A–B.
- 66 Dorotheus of Gaza, *Didaskaliai*, §60, 27, p. 120 Wheeler.
- 67 *Ibid.*, §69, 2, p. 131 Wheeler.
- 68 *Ibid.*, §189, 4–5.
- 69 *Ibid.*, §60, 30, pp. 120–1 Wheeler.
- 70 See above.
- 71 Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, pp. 143, 27ff. Baehrens = pp. 128ff Lawson.
- 72 [Aegon, while the King James Bible reads “If thou know not, O thou fairest among women”, the Greek Septuagint version gives “Unless you know yourself” (*Ean me gnosis scautem*) – Trans.]
- 73 See the references in I. Hadot, *Seneca und die griechisch-römische Tradition der Seelenleitung*, Berlin 1969, pp. 66–71.
- 74 John Chrysostom, *Non esse ad gratiam conueniendum*, PG 50, 659–60.
- 75 Dorotheus of Gaza, *Didaskaliai*, §§111, 13; 117, 7, pp. 170; 175 Wheeler.
- 76 Cf. I. Hadot, *Seneca*, p. 70.
- 77 Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, PG 26, 924B, p. 73 Gregg/Clebsch.
- 78 Dorotheus of Gaza, *Didaskaliai*, §25, 11, p. 91 Wheeler.
- 79 See above.
- 80 Evagrius of Pontus, *Praktikos*, §§54–6, p. 31 Bamberger. Cf. F. Refoule, “Rêves et vie spirituelle d’après Evagre le Pontique,” *Supplément de la Vie Spirituelle* 59 (1961), pp. 470–516.
- 81 Diadochus of Photice, *Kephalaia Gnostica*, 37, p. 106 Des Places.
- 82 Dorotheus of Gaza, *Didaskaliai*, §20, p. 89 Wheeler. I. Regnault and J. de Préville, editors of the *Sources Chrétiennes* edition, cite as a parallel Epictetus, *Discourses*, I, 18, 18.
- 83 *Ibid.*, §120, p. 178 Wheeler. Regnault and de Préville compare Epictetus, *Discourses*, 2, 18.
- 84 Evagrius of Pontus, *Praktikos*, §58, p. 32 Bamberger. In their *Sources Chrétiennes* edition, A. and C. Guillaumont cite as a parallel Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 4, 75.
- 85 Dorotheus of Gaza, *Didaskaliai*, §202, 12.
- 86 Epictetus, *Manual*, 8.
- 87 Dorotheus of Gaza, *Didaskaliai*, §20, 11–13, p. 88 Wheeler.
- 88 Plutarch, *On Carnosity*, 520Dff.
- 89 Dorotheus of Gaza, *Didaskaliai*, 20, pp. 88–9 Wheeler.
- 90 Evagrius of Pontus, *Praktikos*, 2, p. 15 Bamberger.
- 91 See the texts cited by A. and C. Guillaumont in the notes to their commentary on the *Praktikos* (SC 171), p. 499, n. 2; p. 501, n. 3.
- 92 Evagrius of Pontus, *Praktikos*, §§2–3, pp. 15–16 Bamberger.
- 93 Cf. P. Hadot, “La division des parties de la philosophie dans l’Antiquité,” *Museum Helveticum* 36 (1979), pp. 201–23.

- 94 Cf. I. Hadot, *Le problème du néoplatonisme alexandrin. Hierocles et Simplicius*, Paris 1978, pp. 152–8.
- 95 Porphyry, *Sentences*, p. 27, 9, Lamberz.
- 96 Cf. the note in A. and C. Guillaumont, 1971, p. 500.
- 97 Evagrius of Pontus, *Praktikos* §1, p. 15 Bamberger.
- 98 On *amerimnia*, see Diadochus of Photice, *Kephalaia Gnostica* 25, p. 97, 7; 30, p. 100, 19; 65, p. 125, 12; 67, p. 127, 22 Des Places. For Dorotheus of Gaza, see, *inter alia*, *Didaskaliai*, §68, 2.
- 99 For occurrences of *tranquillitas*, cf. John Cassian, *Conferences*, I, 7, vol. I, p. 85 Pichery = p. 42 Iutheid; 19, 11, vol. 3, p. 48 Pichery.
- 100 Dorotheus of Gaza, *Didaskaliai*, §§58–60, pp. 118–20 Wheeler.
- 101 In the treatises of Plutarch and Seneca, for instance.
- 102 See above.
- 103 Maximus Confessor, *Commentary on the Our Father*, PG 90, 900A = p. 114 Berthold.
- 104 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 5, 11, 67, 1, pp. 370–1 Stahlin.
- 105 Gregory Nazianzen, *Epistula* 31, vol. 1, p. 39 Gallay.
- 106 Evagrius of Pontus, *Praktikos*, §52, p. 30 Bamberger. Compare Porphyry, *Sentences*, 8, p. 3, 6 Lamberz: “What nature has bound together, she also unbinds, but that which the soul binds, the soul likewise unbinds. It was nature that bound the body within the soul, but it was the soul which bound itself within the body. Therefore, while it is nature that unbinds the body from the soul, it is the soul which unbinds itself from the body.”
- 107 Cf. above.
- 108 Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 873C, p. 47 Gregg/Clebsch.
- 109 *Ibid.*, 924A, p. 72 Gregg/Clebsch.
- 110 *Ibid.*, 872A, p. 45 Gregg/Clebsch.
- 111 Dorotheus of Gaza, *Didaskaliai*, §151, 47.
- 112 Dorotheus of Gaza, *Life of Dositheus*, §§5–9, edited among Dorotheus’ *Spiritual Works* in Regnault/de Preville 1963, pp. 129ff.
- 113 Cf. A. Voöbus, *A History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* (= CSCO vol. 184, Subsidia 14, vol. 197, Subsidia 17), Louvain 1958 60.

## Part III

### Figures