

SPIRITUAL LIFE

The original claim made in the introduction to this classic volume was that it broke fresh ground: that it set a new agenda for the philosophy of religion and was a reaction against a narrow conception of the discipline that had little to say philosophically about human experience, or subjectivity, or about the religious imagination, or the idea of ‘spirituality’. In a new Preface to the book, Michael McGhee reflects on how the discipline has changed or remained the same in the intervening twenty-five years since first publication. He argues that the connections between ‘philosophy’ and ‘spirituality’ are still developing; and that what we think of as ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ is shifting, along with ideas about self-knowledge. The book contains pertinent chapters by some of the leading thinkers in the field, including Rowan Williams, Janet Martin Soskice, Fergus Kerr, Stephen R. L. Clark and Paul Williams, who offers a comparative piece on Tibetan Buddhism.

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PREFACE

A quarter of a century is not a long time in philosophy, but sometimes minute shifts of movement give way to unexpected larger ones. One reviewer¹ of these essays from the Liverpool conference of 1991 had remarked that such a collection would have been inconceivable twenty years earlier and had welcomed the willingness of the participants to address questions about spirituality and subjectivity, for instance, that an earlier generation of philosophers would have thought beyond the pale of serious philosophical attention. In 1991, there was novelty in papers that invoked Kierkegaard, Simone Weil, Rilke, Boethius, and reflected on and found philosophical interest in the work of artists such as Chardin, Morandi, Rothko, Richard Long, and Tony Cragg. But there was also a new emphasis on ‘the spiritual life’ as *implicated* in the very enterprise: who is it that philosophizes – what, if any, is the relevance of their subjective formation or ‘subjectivity’? But if philosophy – in our case here, the philosophy of religion – was in need of renewal, then some account had to be offered of just what was wrong with it, what it overlooked, what it failed to see because of too narrow a focus.

¹ Ann Loades in *History of European Ideas* 22 (1996), 168.

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The old temptation was to read the history of philosophy exclusively in the light of the present, a selective correcting or applauding of the past, searching out passages in the old texts that showed the mistakes and confusions that we had ourselves overcome and resolved, or early foreshadowings of what we now securely understood – and not noticing much else besides. The ‘much else’ could be left to scholars and historians. These were colonizing raids by a selective attention in pursuit of a prior interest.

One egregious example of this was the almost standard treatment of Descartes, who had insisted in a letter to Princess Elizabeth that the human being was a *union* of body and mind, *une seule personne*; that the relationship between body and mind was to be understood in terms of ‘ordinary life and conversation’; that ‘human being’ was a primitive notion. But for many followers of Wittgenstein a crude unnuanced Cartesian dualism was too tempting – it seemed to display the nevertheless deep-seated philosophical tendency against which the anti-private language argument was directed.

Stephen Clark’s paper brought Descartes into connection with Augustine – securing old truths – and interrogated this strawman Cartesianism of the first-year philosophy seminar room, though it was perhaps much worse than that, as Sarah Coakley also implies in her own reflections² on the divergences between Eastern and Western Christendom and their disastrous repercussions for the formation of an

² Republished in her *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

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attenuated doctrine of individualistic privacy for which Descartes himself is by no means wholly to blame.

This selective attitude to the history of philosophy is now itself slowly receding into the past, but it is worth emphasizing that what the old selectivity overlooked was the possibility of a *correcting* and augmenting of the present in the light of the past – the possibility of a *renewal* of philosophy inspired by and learning from the work of earlier philosophers, casually misread or neglected.

When we are more or less obscurely dissatisfied with our philosophical present – as perhaps too self-referential, too minute, too detached from or stifling of the existential human being and ‘the problem of existence’ – a more disinterested and humbler reading of the past may yield insights and possibilities that can refresh the present and give us a better purchase on the dissatisfaction. A similarly disinterested but nevertheless attentive reading of other cultures and other philosophical traditions can offer us the same sort of service or *therapeia*. Although the Arab philosophers had always been acknowledged, Islam hardly registered in the philosophy of religion, and it was all too tempting to make Procrustean moves on the non-theistic Asian and East Asian traditions – rather than adjusting the bed or the template in the light of the observed phenomena. Twenty-five years ago, Paul Williams’s essay on Tibetan Buddhism was a challenge to philosophers unfamiliar with the different strands of Buddhist philosophy.³ There is less

³ But see his *The Unexpected Way: On Converting from Buddhism to Catholicism* (London: T&T Clark International, 2002).

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excuse for such lack of familiarity now, but even then it was clear enough that a different notion of ‘faith’ was becoming available in the idea of the possibility – to be explored, rather than ‘believed’ – of ‘seeing things as they really are’, a possibility whose disconcerting and existential premise is that we largely don’t thus see them and do not know that we don’t.

Although the name of Pierre Hadot doesn’t appear in the index of this collection, and although his 1981 *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* was not available in English until Michael Chase’s 1995 translation (*Philosophy as a Way of Life*⁴), the influence of the ancient conception of philosophy was already present – palpably so – in this volume, as may be seen in Clark’s recourse to Epictetus and Augustine, in Coakley’s to Gregory Palamas, in Rowan Williams’s to St Bernard, in John Haldane’s to Boethius.

It is the thing to say, of a collection such as this, that it breaks new ground, that it sets a new agenda, that the papers are seminal; and, indeed, in the original introduction of twenty-five years ago, this was the editorial claim: that the collection set a new agenda for the philosophy of religion, was a reaction against a narrow conception of the discipline that *reduced* it to natural theology and had little or nothing to say philosophically about human experience or subjectivity, about the religious imagination or the idea of ‘spirituality’. But the ‘new agenda’ was in reality a return to an old agenda, that of the ancient conception of philosophy as a

⁴ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

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‘spiritual exercise’, even if that expression did not quite make it into the title of the Hadot translation. This return is perhaps more disturbing for the responsibilities of the philosophical vocation than it at first appears. Clark commented, on a remark of Descartes, that ‘Philosophy teaches us to speak with an appearance of truth, and causes us to be admired by the less learned’, and pointed out that Descartes was neither the first nor the last ‘to complain that academic philosophising was betraying a trust’. He cites David Burrell’s warning of the need to speak *in propria persona*, of the danger of the ‘soporific amnesia’ that forgets the philosopher’s ‘God-given’ task ‘to do what Socrates did and to live as he lived’, citing the great Epictetus: ‘one who pretends to “teach philosophy” without the knowledge, virtue and strength of soul to cope with distressed and corrupted souls, “and above all the counsel of God advising him to occupy this office”, is a vulgariser of the mysteries, a quack doctor’. This is a daunting conception of what it is to be a philosopher and gives point to the Kierkegaardian emphasis of that question, ‘Who is it who does philosophy?’ And what is the scope of philosophy itself – does it offer ‘answers’ or show that they inevitably recede? Certainly, philosophers in the Anglophone traditions have not often felt called upon to talk of ‘strength of soul’, even when they manifest it in their lives and teaching.

Haldane offered an engaged and sympathetic account of the *style* as well as the substance of Boethius’s *De consolazione philosophiae*, drawing on aesthetic experience and the reflections of artists in ways that connected serendipitously with Anthony O’Hear’s influential essay, in

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which he compared Chardin and Rothko in a discussion of the distinction between the minute particulars of ‘the real’ and the treacherous edge of the abyss of ‘the Real’. Haldane explored the possibility of a *philosophical* consolation in a perceptual mode of contemplative thought – the feeling, in seeing certain works of art, ‘that in some sense all is well’. The issue is pursued in later reflections by James P. Mackey who commented in a note in his book *Power and Christian Ethics*: ‘One supposes that this is the best that can be done by secularists for whom a personal God does not register on the credibility scale’ – the phrase ‘credibility scale’ was Haldane’s, though he was talking about a particular version of Platonism rather than the idea of a personal God – ‘and one cannot but feel how little consolation this alternative can offer to those oppressed by a sense that in a godless world at least as much is force and a source of fear, as might be deemed “well” or about to become well.’⁵ Haldane is no secularist, of course, but the ubiquity of ‘force and fear’ is the very condition under which people *seek* ‘consolation’, though whether they should seek consolation at all is another matter entirely, as Iris Murdoch might have said, and we are all aware of her example of the power of the hovering kestrel,⁶ not to console but to change mood and provide previously unavailable perspective. Nevertheless, talk of a ‘God-given task’ and ‘the counsel of God’ will give pause to those engaged in the development of a secular

⁵ James P. Mackey, *Power and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 219–20.

⁶ In her *The Sovereignty of Good*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2001).

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humanism that seeks inspiration in the ancient conception: how do we construe these expressions? Is something vital added by this talk of ‘the counsel of God’ or is it merely rhetorical and defeasible? The limits (and pretensions) of philosophy for solving the ‘problem of existence’ in terms other than those of ‘a religious understanding’ are brought out by Michael Weston’s essay on Kierkegaard, seminal work continued in his *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy*,⁷ in which philosophy is charged with a deeper amnesia than Burrell’s: ‘[I]t is this philosophy forgets: “what it means that you and I and he are human beings, each one for himself” . . . It forgets the relation the individual has to his own life.’

Now widening the scope of the philosophy of religion hardly casts doubt on the efficacy (or otherwise) of natural theology, but doubt might well be cast on the mission to widen the scope in the first place. Talk of ‘subjectivity’, or of ‘spirituality’ or ‘religious imagination’, might be thought to be entirely secondary to argument and sharply analytical conclusions in philosophical theology – to depend for their sense and validation upon the viability of a ‘religious belief’ whose rational grounding was the proper concern of the philosophers. ‘Spirituality’ seemed anyway too embarrassing, too diffuse and vague, too soft a notion for the attention of a philosopher thus concerned with hard argument, though what this attitude revealed was the assumption that the content of ‘spirituality’ was more or less restricted to attitudes and

⁷ Michael Weston, *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1994).

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dispositions towards the God of the Abrahamic traditions and could look after itself philosophically, though it would crumble or evaporate if ‘religious belief’ were shown to be, in Nietzsche’s word, ‘unbelievable’. Rowan Williams’s paper on the injunction to ‘know thyself’ helped emphatically to broaden ‘spirituality’ into a richer sense of self-knowledge and the conflicts of the interior life which were also public and political. Similarly, the idea of ‘religious imagination’ *appeared* at least, as Mackey observed of an essay by his late Edinburgh colleague Ronald Hepburn, to stand in need of metaphysical argument to validate the intimations of (culturally specific) image and metaphor: ‘yes, indeed, he seems to say, such claims about the nature and activities of imagination might well succeed in the sphere of religious belief, if we had something additional, some actual evidence for the actual existence of a divine object which we could then claim is in this way, however tentatively, apprehended’. Another Edinburgh philosopher, the late Timothy Sprigge, offered a discussion of the contrasts between F. H. Bradley and William James, making use of a distinction James made between ‘crass’ and ‘refined’ ‘supernaturalism’, relating it to the work of Don Cupitt and D. Z. Phillips, referring us to Mrs Humphrey Ward’s (Mary Arnold’s) *Robert Elsmere* and the tortured Jesuit-ridden figure depicted in her *Helbeck of Bannisdale*.

As for ‘subjectivity’, ‘being subjective’ was a category of failure, the failure to be properly objective in one’s pursuit of the truth – a view wholly innocent of Kierkegaard’s talk of the ‘subjective thinker’, of objective thinking as itself a sort of failure, of faith as the highest passion of subjectivity, of the *artistic* necessity for indirect communication.

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In his influential discussion of Chardin and Rothko, O’Hear remarked that ‘we come to see Chardin’s achievement as the achievement it is just when we begin to understand that we are standing above an abyss, cosmically speaking, and that human domesticity and human perception rest on no secure foundation’. O’Hear is contrasting Chardin’s painting with the vast Rothko canvasses, doing so in the course of a critique of what he sees as the troubling universalism of John Hick’s account of ‘the Real’ and what he takes to be its unconscious tendency towards something politically sinister: ‘Against such a background the emptiness – at its worst, the rhetoric – of Rothko would be vindicated against the painstaking and human modesty of Chardin, and what Chardin presents to us as an all-too-fragile achievement will be swallowed up in the abyss of the divine.’ Bertrand Russell once said that he felt of Joseph Conrad ‘that he thought of civilized and morally tolerable human life as a dangerous walk on a thin crust of barely cooled lava which at any moment might break and let the unwary sink into fiery depths’. The point about this ‘dangerous walk’ is that we can be unconscious of the thin crust of barely cooled lava, and perhaps we would lose our nerve if we knew too much. Knowledge, or acknowledgement, is difficult and episodic, jostled and bullied in our cramped mental spaces by the devices of self-deception and false forms of assurance, trading the venture of faith for the *mauvaise foi* of a too emphatic certitude that resists the openness of negative capability. Nevertheless, as Oliver Leaman made clear in his paper on philosophy in the Islamic traditions, not

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everyone has an aptitude for *philosophy*, and not everyone should be exposed to it if it merely undermines them without expectation of resolution. And it has to be said that some of the manoeuvres of philosophers are merely destructive. But if human beings are riddled with denial and self-deception, relying on false assurances, how does this contaminate the work of those human beings who take up philosophy? This talk of false assurance, denial, evasion, and self-deception sounds offensive – one can imagine that a philosopher of religion might well be affronted – but it does not specifically single out philosophers, who are only one class of ‘existing individuals’ as much a prey to double-mindedness as anyone else engaged in ‘the dangerous walk’. O’Hear quotes a passage from Rilke’s Ninth *Duino Elegy*:

Are we perhaps here to say: House,
 Bridge, Well, Gate, Jug, Fruit Tree, Window . . .

. . . articulating something about things, as he says, ‘which things themselves can neither articulate nor experience’. In Janet Martin Soskice’s essay, we are brought from this Rilkean mission into the messy domesticity of child-rearing and a natural responsiveness – ‘the object of attention is not a changeless truth so much as a moving target’ – as she draws on the work of Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil on love and attention: a *maternal* responsiveness, indeed, that is the image of a wider just and loving regard, reminiscent of the Buddhist *Karaniyamettasutta*, in which the love of a mother for her only child is the symbol of a more embracing, but still natural, responsiveness.

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In a review of this collection, Gareth Moore⁸ wondered what was ‘religious’ here, apart from the implicit context of Soskice’s Christian affiliation. He regarded her as offering a *religious* spirituality, with the implication that the notion of spirituality is not to be tied to that qualification, so that the idea of a humanist spirituality also makes sense, in conflict though it may be with Kierkegaard’s ‘religious understanding’. He raised similar questions about Fergus Kerr’s discussion of René Girard’s astonishing account of the scapegoating mechanism:

The articles of O’Hear, Soskice and Kerr, among others, thus raise the whole question what we actually count as religion and how far we are ready to expand the limits of the religious.

This is an important and still pressing question and he asked it also of the Buddhist traditions: whether they should be thought of as ‘religious’ at all. In the case of Buddhism, we can certainly play the game, as many do, of matching its traditions and practices to necessary and sufficient conditions for the satisfaction of what seems too much like a concept frozen in a particular cultural time zone. Nevertheless, questions continue to be asked about whether Buddhism is a religion or a philosophy. But we are dealing here, to recall a phrase of Soskice, not with a changeless truth about the real nature of religion but with a moving target. There are indeed courses in universities on Philosophy and Spirituality, but it isn’t merely that it’s more cost-effective to subsume them

⁸ In *New Blackfriars* 74 (1993).

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under the course on Philosophy of Religion but that these critical notions are developing before our eyes, and that the connections between what we think of as ‘religious’ and what we think of as ‘spiritual’ are shifting, along with our ideas about what kind of self-knowledge or self-renunciation or self-overcoming can emerge within what kind of world or ‘reality’, as we confront our dual capacity for good and evil and recognize, to use Rowan Williams’s example, that it isn’t just Lear of whom it can justly be said that ‘he hath ever but slenderly known himself’. It is where we start.