



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

## Philosophy and the contemplative way of life

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### Abstract

One way of understanding the significance of Christina Van Dyke's book *A Hidden Wisdom* is as a plea for the recovery of an ideal of philosophy as, in part, 'a way of life', and for a reintegration of that ideal into current philosophical practice. In this review, I consider how this proposal might be developed.

There are various ways in which we might understand the significance of Christina Van Dyke's important book, *A Hidden Wisdom: Medieval Contemplatives on Self-Knowledge, Reason, Love, Persons, and Immortality*, and here is one. In his widely discussed text *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Pierre Hadot (1995) has argued that the philosophical schools of the Hellenistic period, which stand at the source of the western philosophical tradition, were comprised both of 'philosophical discourse' – that is, bodies of theory concerning various topics in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics – and also a 'way of life' – involving a set of practical precepts, and associated spiritual exercises, which were intended to contribute to the moral and emotional formation of the person, and thereby to their flourishing according to the ideals of life propounded by the relevant school. Hadot maintains that for the philosophers of the ancient world, the way of life was prior to the discourse, in the sense that the discourse was intended to serve the way of life, most obviously, by representing the cosmos and ourselves in ways that would be, in practical terms, spiritually productive. Hadot adds that this conception of philosophy, as ordered fundamentally to the enactment of a certain ideal of life, was lost in the Middle Ages, due to the split that occurred then between philosophy as a 'discourse' or body of specialized theory, and philosophy as a set of exercises designed to enable a certain way of life – with the first becoming the preserve of the emerging universities, and the second being consigned to Christian devotional practice. So according to Hadot, there are two modes of philosophizing, the discursive and theoretical and, second, the practical and imaginative, and these were once closely connected, but have for the best part of a thousand years, in the western tradition anyway, proceeded largely independently of one another, to such an extent that only the first is recognized as genuinely 'philosophical' in our current academic discourse.

Whatever one makes of Hadot's claim about the priority of philosophy as a way of life in Platonism, Aristotelianism, and the other ancient philosophical schools, it seems clear enough that in the modern academy, philosophy is standardly taken to consist very largely in a body of specialized, theoretical discourse. And one way of understanding the significance of Christina Van Dyke's book is by reading it as a plea for the recovery of an ideal of philosophy as, in part, 'a way of life', and for a reintegration of that ideal

into current philosophical practice. In keeping with the drift of Hadot's account, she proposes to do this by returning to the medieval period, and charting the distinction between philosophy as it was practised in the universities of the time – by figures who have come to define our conception of that period's contribution to the subject we call 'philosophy' – and a further set of intellectual disciplines that are not so well known, and that were more directly concerned with the practical and emotional formation of the person. This second mode of thought, she maintains, was directed at some of the same kinds of question as the first – specifically, according to this book, questions about the nature of self-knowledge, reason, love, persons, and the afterlife – but the 'methodology' and 'focus' of this further movement of thought were, she notes, different (Van Dyke (2022), 179), to the extent that it gave a larger role to, for example, the first-personal perspective, and metaphorical and allegorical forms of reflection. In brief, Van Dyke's suggestion is that we should allow that in the medieval period, specifically, in what she terms 'Rome-based' traditions of Christian thought of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, we can discern two forms of philosophical reflection: not only the university-based, 'scholastic' mode of philosophical reasoning with which we are all familiar, but also a further style of thought, one she dubs 'contemplative' rather than scholastic, which on her account has just as much of a claim to be considered as genuinely philosophical, and which in fact produced, in the medieval period, a distinctive perspective on a variety of fundamental philosophical questions.

Van Dyke develops this proposal by reference to a series of case studies, addressing in turn the five themes that appear in the book's subtitle, and arguing that contemplative philosophical traditions, as developed in the medieval period, offer new insights into each of them – and indeed insights that are likely to elude a more scholastic mode of investigation, given the relatively abstract and depersonalized nature of its methods. In agreement with Hadot's account of the character of ancient philosophical thought, Van Dyke expounds the central role of spiritual exercises in contemplative styles of reflection. One significant example concerns the practice of 'meditation' on scriptural passages, especially texts depicting the life of Christ or his mother (*ibid.*, 112). Many guides were written to support this practice, advising the reader on how to locate themselves, imaginatively, in various biblical scenes, and on where to direct their attention once located there, and what to think of themselves as doing to contribute to the unfolding of the narrative.

This pattern of thinking is of course strikingly different from the formal modes of argumentation deployed in the universities: it is focally concerned not with abstractly conceptual questions, or the large scale structure of reality, but with the densely particular characterization of a precisely defined narrative episode, in all its sensory detail; and the person engaged in such meditation is required to give a large role to the imagination, both in the sense of calling to mind the visual and other perceptual properties of the relevant scene – where this could take the form of a mental imaging of various of its features – and in the sense of creatively extrapolating from the scriptural data, by envisaging various ways in which the narrative might be extended, not least through one's own participation in it. In this way, the meditator would also be drawn directly into questions of action – by thinking of the scene not simply as a spectator would, but by reference to their own enacted contribution to it. And crucially, Van Dyke stresses, this sort of practice was intended to engage the person's affective responses, drawing them into a closer, felt identification with the characters in the story, and setting up habits of felt response that could shape the reader's practical construal of the data of faith and life in general, and not only those involved in this particular narrative. For instance, in the widely influential, late thirteenth-century *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, the reader is invited to consider the Holy Family travelling back from Egypt, and to imagine Jesus riding on a small donkey (this detail is not included in the original narrative, of course) and to picture themselves walking alongside him and then taking him

‘joyfully’ in their arms when he asks to dismount (Van Dyke (2022), 117–118). Here we see how the biblical narrative can be reconstructed and extended in the imagination, and how the spiritual practitioner is hereby drawn into the narrative practically and emotionally. The contemplative tradition was committed to what we might term picture-based forms of thinking in other contexts too – as for instance, when human faculties or virtues were personified, and set in dialogue with one another, or when a vision was reported, and its symbolic meaning explored (*ibid.*, 165).

It is clear enough that in these respects, the contemplative tradition was committed to different forms of reflection from those that were prized in the universities. And this difference is indeed so marked that we might wonder whether these contemplatives were really engaged in philosophy, understood broadly as the examination of the structure of reality and the nature of our access to it, as distinct from picturesque forms of thinking, which might in various ways shape our emotions and motivations, but without evidently extending our understanding of the world and our relationship to it. A central claim of Van Dyke’s book is, of course, that the patterns of thought exhibited in contemplative forms of enquiry are not just worthy objects of philosophical examination, but themselves ways of philosophizing. Here, Van Dyke seems to set us a more challenging task than did Hadot in his treatment of a related question, to the extent that Hadot’s proposal that philosophy is most fundamentally a way of life makes a truism of the claim that spiritual exercises are a key constituent of philosophical thought. By contrast, Van Dyke is, I think, interested in the idea that at least some of the central topics of theoretical philosophy – of what Hadot calls ‘philosophical discourse’ – can be more deeply understood, and not just recast in a practical mode, through the use of contemplative methods. On one natural reading, Hadot reduces theoretical philosophy to questions of practice, by assessing the claims of philosophical discourse simply by reference to their usefulness for the living out of some moral or spiritual ideal that can be specified independently of the discourse. By contrast, Van Dyke is inviting us to take various forms of thought that were integral to Christian devotional practice as important for our understanding, in metaphysically substantive terms, of themes such as the nature of persons and immortality, albeit that the mode of reflection deployed here is not abstractly analytic or theoretical. Let’s see how Van Dyke uses the resources of the contemplative tradition to treat the second of these topics. To make progress with this question, we need first of all to characterize contemplative forms of thought in a little more detail.

Along with the distinction between contemplative and scholastic methods, a further central theme of this book is the distinction between the varieties of contemplative thought – and notably between those that take the imagination, the emotions, and in general our embodiment to be enduringly important for human understanding, and for relationship to God in the afterlife, and those that take, for instance, the picture-based form of thinking that is characteristic of scriptural meditation, or equally a narrational understanding of our identity, to be at best passing phases of the movement into spiritual maturity, to be transcended as we approach the deeper forms of relationship to God. Van Dyke associates the first tradition of thought with figures such as Hadewijch (active in the mid-thirteenth century), Angela of Foligno (c. 1248–1309) and Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), and the second with, among others, Marguerite Porete (d. 1310), Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1327/8), and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (c. 1349–c. 1395). The second, ‘apophatic’ tradition Van Dyke takes to be committed to an ideal of ‘self-abnegation’ – according to which the deepest forms of union with God involve a loss of any sense of one’s individuality, and in turn, therefore, a transcending of sensory forms of experience, and of embodiment considered as important for spiritual well-being. The second, ‘affectivist’ tradition is, by contrast, committed to the idea that at the eschaton, the full panoply of human powers will be ‘fulfilled’ (Van Dyke (2022), 86, 184) – and while sometimes open to the possibility of a form of experience, in the present, that is ‘dark’ and involves the dissolution of any sense of distinction

from God, this school affirms that the self remains distinct from God, and that even in the deepest forms of union with the divine, we are properly related to God by way of the emotions and, in general, bodily forms of experience (*ibid.*, 195–196).

In medieval scholastic traditions of thought, and in modern philosophical debates informed by those traditions, there has been much discussion of the question of whether it is primarily by way of knowledge or by way of love that the human person is ultimately united to God. And Van Dyke argues that this distinction – between love and knowledge as the primary modes of this relationship – fails to track a further, still more significant distinction, concerning the contribution of embodiment to the constitution of our final end, with apophaticists giving the body no positive role in their account of this state, while affectivists maintained, on the contrary, that the body remains spiritually important, even in the deepest forms of union with the divine. The question of whether to prioritize love or knowledge is, Van Dyke urges, logically independent of the question of whether to adopt an apophatic or affectivist reading of our final end, with apophatists and affectivists ranged on either side of the former question. Here, we see how reference to contemplative forms of thought alerts us to a question of philosophical substance, concerning the nature of immortality, that has not been brought fully into focus in scholastic philosophical traditions. We might still wonder: should we allow that these contemplative approaches are not only occupied with such questions, but contribute in some significant measure to their identification, and in turn, at least potentially, their resolution?

There is some reason to answer ‘yes’ to the first of these questions: it is the first-personal – the experiential rather than abstractly theoretical – character of contemplative forms of thought that allows them to throw into particularly clear relief the question of how we are to understand the phenomenology of union with God, and in turn questions such as whether that union will involve any felt distinction from the divine, or any continued, spiritually significant, role for sensory forms of experience. This feature of contemplative thought points to a larger truth about the part that can be played by such thought, relative to scholastic thought, Van Dyke invites us to think: a style of reflection that is sensitive to the felt quality of human experience will be better equipped to address questions about what it is like to be a person, or like to reason as a human animal, and so on, and to that extent will support an existentially denser account – denser than can be offered by a scholastic kind of enquiry – of the five topics around which this book is organized (*ibid.*, 161, 170, 179–180).

That leaves a question about whether contemplative methods of thought can not only help us to identify or formulate novel dimensions of questions of philosophical concern, such as the nature of the afterlife, but also contribute to their resolution. Strikingly, so far as I can see, Van Dyke does not take a stance on whether we should be affectivists or apophaticists, though I think it is clear where her sympathies lie (with the affectivist view, of course). This is, I take it, because in this volume her central aim is simply to display the nature and range of contemplative thought, and the philosophical interest of the questions that it draws to our attention, rather than to settle those questions – for instance, by assembling arguments for one side or other on matters that are in dispute between practitioners of contemplative philosophy. Allowing that Van Dyke’s concerns are quite properly circumscribed in this way, we might wonder about the capacity of contemplative methods to yield substantive insight into fundamental philosophical questions. On this point, Van Dyke’s text points towards an elaboration and revision of Hadot’s narrative, I suggest – by drawing attention to the role of Christian doctrinal resources in sustaining the claim that contemplative modes of thought give us access to important features of the normative and metaphysical structure of the world, that is, to precisely the kinds of truth that theoretical forms of philosophical enquiry, as standardly conceived, have sought to reveal.

For example, Van Dyke explores various ways in which the affectivist tradition is rooted in a keen appreciation of the humanity of the incarnate Christ: it is, for instance, his

vulnerability as a small child that provides the focus of the meditative exercise I mentioned above. And this tradition is naturally allied to the thought that Jesus retains his full humanity, body and soul, in his glorified state (*ibid.*, 190) – and if that is so, then it will follow, presumably, that the body of Christ is enduringly important in the life of God. Here, a distinctively Christian metaphysic, and a certain reading of the idea of God as incarnate, can play a role, potentially, in substantiating the claim that contemplative methods are philosophically fruitful. To put the point over-briefly, this is because on this account, the sensory and narrational particularity of the human life of the incarnate Christ, and in turn, we might infer, the particularity of other human lives, turns out to be of fundamental significance for the life of God – from which it follows that our affective, imagination-informed reckoning with the sensory detail of the life of the human Christ, and other human lives, can in principle play the sort of role that theoretical forms of philosophical enquiry have, on the standard reading, aspired to play, of attending to what is normatively and metaphysically basic. A further core commitment of these contemplative traditions involves the idea that the shaping of a person's affectivity, through meditative and other spiritual exercises, prepares the way, potentially, for a deepened relationship to the divine, one that is grace-infused and therefore beyond the reach of human beings' natural powers (*ibid.*, 113). So, for these traditions, it is 'charitable' rather than abstractly cerebral forms of understanding that provide our best prospect of union with, and deepened apprehension of, God (*ibid.*, 81, 112, 119–120).

In these respects, then, Van Dyke's account does not simply pick up and fill in some of the detail of Hadot's historical narrative, but radically reconfigures it, to the extent that she does not reduce contemplative forms of thought to questions of practice, and to the extent that she shows how this elevated view of the epistemic status of contemplative thought is allied to a set of metaphysical commitments, concerning the humanity of the incarnate God, and the role of the divine initiative rather than simply human effort – of the kind envisaged in Hadot's account of spiritual exercises – in bringing the person to a fuller apprehension of the divine. Setting Van Dyke's account alongside Hadot's provides one perspective on this book's importance, but there are others, which are as much of interest. Notably, Van Dyke's discussion offers a much more inclusive picture, than is standard, of philosophical practice in the medieval period, insofar as it involves, and centrally involves, women – and in addition vernacular traditions of thought, and not simply those that were cast, as in the universities, in Latin. And the book not only discusses but exhibits the contemplative ideal of enquiry in various ways: it is beautifully written and illustrated, and draws extensively on quotations from its, mostly female, protagonists, so that they are not just represented third-personally, but themselves speak. I have here only touched on some of the many themes addressed in this fine book, and, regrettably, I have not managed to engage in detail with any of the many arresting contemplative texts that are cited. But I hope to have said enough to show how Christina Van Dyke's expansive vision of what it is to think philosophically about religious questions is elaborated with care and rigour, and a keen sensitivity to the lived experience of her subjects, and in ways that will surely inspire her readers to take up these contemplative sources for themselves.

## References

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