Course Description

This course will introduce the concepts, practices, and history of ancient “spiritual exercises,” their modern transformations and ongoing relevance, as nothing short of a complete philosophy and, indeed, “way of life.”

The ascetic practice of estrangement and disengagement from everyday life, followed by an all the more intense engagement with and immersion in it – a practice known from ancient and modern practices of spiritual transformation – has typically been associated with a path coming from and returning toward inner experience and interior discourse (the dialogue of the soul with itself), rather than with matters of public, social, juridical or political concern, first and foremost. Indeed, we do not tend to identify spiritual phenomena (facts and events) as tied to even deeper and wider-ranging efforts to express – and, indeed, prepare ourselves – for a cosmic or global sense of “wonder” at the world, that is, at existence as such as well as in toto. Yet, in this aspiration, the ancient Greek conception of “cosmic consciousness” and the distinctively modern sense of “absolute value” are of one mind.

As Bruno Latour has noted, “spiritual facts” and the intellectual and other forms of “exercise” that come with them represent “the most amazing series of practices invented in history to hold human souls suspended by a virtual hook slightly above their head.” They make clear that, when restricted to a normative ethical optics, to a perfectionism all too narrowly defined, spiritual facts and events lose much of their broader, probing and most urgent interest and aim. The latter’s signification and force are at once profoundly metaphysical, as authors as different as Spinoza and Wittgenstein knew very well, and resolutely pragmatic, as Pierre Hadot has further insisted. It is the existential – we might add, ontological or phenomenological – rather than psychological,
that is, merely mental or representational aspect of spiritual life and ritual in its uniquely intensive and expansive dimensions that the present course seeks to explore.

Along the way, a form, manner or style of lived “political spirituality” (the term is freely adopted from Michel Foucault) starts to emerge, exemplified by moments and movements, instants and instances, whose common features, across the ages, in Western and non-Western contexts, are increasingly hard to ignore. Indeed, with and against Hadot, this course interprets spiritual exercise as a generic and strangely generative concept, whose rigorous concept and multiple practices cohere around a seemingly simple vision of elementary perception and responsible agency. Both are premised upon a striking coincidence of opposites that the presumed incoherencies in ancient philosophical treatises and schools of thought first expressed in remarkable ways and put to the greatest possible formative effect. This coincidentia oppositorum governs not just the phenomena and events in question but also the very philology and historiography, hermeneutics and pragmatics, which are needed to make them visible, heard, and useful again. Only as a minimally defined dual vision or aspect of one and the same reality (cosmos and world or globe) the ancient conception and practice of spiritual exercise and its later successor forms teach us to live now and well, just as they allow us to — maximally—see and set things “aright.”

Course Requirements

The course will be a mixture of lecture and discussion formats. The lectures, however, are informal in that you are free to ask questions or comment as you might see fit at any moment. Students will be expected to contribute to the discussion, and most especially, to read the assigned material so that our discussions may indeed be productive. Attendance is expected.

For the lecture and discussion, and rather than summarize the readings, students are expected to prepare three questions for every class based on the course readings. Please email these until the morning before lecture. Over the semester, each student will be asked to give a brief (10-15 min) presentation on one of the course readings, or on ideas that emerge on a topic under discussion that week. If you prefer, you may work in groups of two. Although these presentations are for personal reactions to the texts and ideas in question, they are also intended to provide a point of departure for class discussion and should try to raise specific questions. A final essay, on a topic of your preference, will be due on the last day of classes. As of mid-November, you should discuss your paper topics with me.

I will hold office hours every week. Please make use of them as you see fit, especially if you are having difficulties with the course. Specific page assignments for each week will be announced over the previous class.
Week 1  **General Introduction**  
Hadot, *Philosophy as Way of Life*, Part I, Chapter 1 and 2, Part III, Chapter 6

Week 2  Hadot, *Philosophy as Way of Life*, Part II, Chapter 3 and 4

Week 3  Philo of Alexandria’s allegory of education (*De congressu eruditionis gratia*)

Week 4  Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Introduction, Books 2, 3, and 4

Week 5  Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, “Technologies of the Self”

Week 6  Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Forms of Life*, “What is an Apparatus?”

Week 7  Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*

Week 8  Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Week 9  Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Chapter IV; Lefebvre, *Human Rights as a Way of Life*

Week 10  Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “In Praise of Philosophy”

Week 11  French Spiritualism

Week 12  Tanya Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*

Week 13  Nusseibeh, *The Story of Reason in Islam*

Week 14  David Shulman, “Toward a Yoga of the Imagination”
Required and Recommended Reading (fragments and chapters from, in alphabetical order):


Philo of Alexandria, selections on preliminary instruction, philosophy, and wisdom: *De congressu quaerendae eruditionis gratia*


**Further Recommended Reading:**

