

On Philosophy as a Spiritual Exercise

Radical Theologies

Radical Theologies is a call for transformational theologies that break out of traditional locations and approaches. The rhizomic ethos of radical theologies enable the series to engage with an ever-expanding radical expression and critique of theologies that have entered or seek to enter the public sphere, arising from the continued turn to religion and especially radical theology in politics, social sciences, philosophy, theory, cultural, and literary studies. The post-theistic theology both driving and arising from these intersections is the focus of this series.

Series Editors

Mike Grimshaw is an associate professor of Sociology at Canterbury University in New Zealand.

Michael Zbaraschuk is a lecturer at the University of Washington, Tacoma and a visiting assistant professor at Pacific Lutheran University.

Joshua Ramey is a visiting assistant professor at Haverford College.

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On Philosophy as a Spiritual Exercise: A Symposium

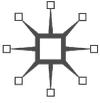
By Philip Goodchild

ON PHILOSOPHY AS A SPIRITUAL
EXERCISE

A SYMPOSIUM

Edited by
PHILIP GOODCHILD

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All Christian knowledge, whatever formal rigor it betrays, should be concerned. But what edifies is just this concern. The concern is the relation to life, to what a person actually is, and thus, in a Christian sense, it is seriousness. In a Christian sense, the superior elevation of disinterested knowing, far from being greater seriousness, is frivolity and pretence. But again, what edifies is seriousness.

Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death, Preface*

So much at least I can affirm with confidence about any who have written or propose to write on these questions, pretending to a knowledge of the problems with which I am concerned, whether they claim to have learned from me or from others or to have made their discoveries for themselves: it is impossible, in my opinion, that they can have learned anything at all about the subject . . . On this account no sensible man will venture to express his deepest thoughts in words, especially in a form which is unchangeable, as is true of written outlines . . . For this reason anyone who is seriously studying high matters will be the last to write about them and thus expose his thought to the envy and criticism of men.

Plato, *Letter VII*, 341c, 343a, 344c

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Contents

<i>Series Preface</i>	ix
<i>An Invitation</i>	xi
Alcibiades	
<i>Editor's Introduction</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xix
1 Thinking and Life: The Speech of <i>Phaedrus</i>	1
2 Ends and Illusions: The Speech of <i>Pausanias</i>	23
3 Hypocrisy: The Speech of <i>Eryximachus</i>	47
4 Dispositions and Interests: The Speech of <i>Aristophanes</i>	67
5 Mutual Attention: The Speech of <i>Agathon</i>	89
6 Death and Love: The Speech of <i>Socrates</i>	107
7 Conclusion: <i>Alcibiades's</i> Confession	141
<i>Appendix: Philosophy as a Spiritual Exercise</i>	153
<i>Notes</i>	173
<i>Index</i>	183

Series Preface

Radical Theologies encompasses the intersections of constructive theology, secular theology, death of god theologies, political theologies, continental thought, and contemporary culture.

For too long, radical theology has been wandering in the wilderness, while other forms of theological discourse have been pontificating to increasingly smaller audiences. However, there has been a cross-disciplinary rediscovery and turn to radical theologies as locations from which to engage with the multiplicities of the twenty-first century society, wherein the radical voice is also increasingly a theologically engaged voice with the recovery and rediscovery of radical theology as that which speaks the critique of “truth to power.”

Radical Theologies reintroduces radical theological discourse into the public eye, debate, and discussion by covering the engagement of radical theology with culture, society, literature, politics, philosophy, and the discipline of religion.

Providing an outlet for those writing and thinking at the intersections of these areas with radical theology, *Radical Theologies* expresses an interdisciplinary engagement and approach that was being undertaken without a current series to situate itself within. This series, the first dedicated to radical theology, is also dedicated to redefining the very terms of theology as a concept and practice.

Just as Rhizomic thought engages with multiplicities and counters dualistic and prescriptive approaches, this series offers a timely outlet for an expanding field of “breakout” radical theologies that seek to redefine the very terms of theology. This includes work on and about the so-labeled death of god theologies and theologians who emerged in the 1960s and those who follow in their wake. Other radical theologies emerge from what can be termed underground theologies and also a/theological foundations. All share the aim and expression of breaking out of walls previously ideologically invisible.

An Invitation

Alcibiades

You know what people say about snakebite—that you'll only talk about it with your fellow victims: Only they will understand the pain and forgive you for all the things it made you do. Well, something much more painful than a snake has bitten me in my most sensitive part—I mean my heart, or my soul, or whatever you want to call it, which has been struck and bitten by philosophy, whose grip on young and eager souls is much more vicious than a viper's and makes them do the most amazing things. Now, all you people here, Phaedrus, Agathon, Eryximachus, Pausanias, Aristodemus, Aristophanes—I need hardly mention Socrates himself—and all the rest have shared in this madness, the Bacchic frenzy of philosophy . . . (as for anyone else who is not an initiate, my story's not for you: block your ears) . . .

(Plato, *Symposium*, 217e–218b)

... and so I invite you to a symposium. Not an arid, formal event like those found in a contemporary university, filled with detached and theoretical speculations, where careers are advanced or defeated. Instead, a gathering of initiates, an occasion for intoxicated speeches—in praise of the love of wisdom.

Who has ever spoken thus, in praise, not of wisdom, but of philosophy itself? Who but the original Alcibiades, in his encomium to Socrates, the personification of philosophy? Who gave the greatest hymn to love in Plato's *Symposium* if not Alcibiades, who at least knew that true love is love of a person? Who has explained how philosophy has deceived us all, seducing us with offers of virtue and forms of beauty, with its arguments that are little more than hollow statues?

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Yet philosophy is truly worthy of a god, bursting with figures of virtue inside. For who has explained that it is the melodies of philosophy, not its forms, that have the power to possess and so reveal those people who are ready for the god and his mysteries? Alcibiades, once again.

It is time for a symposium of initiates, of intoxicated hymns of praise, the confession of madness and mysteries. For I used to think, like so many others, that philosophy was something to be thought and taught, not something a person should do. As a teacher of philosophy, I used to think that what I was doing was important, but in fact I was the most worthless woman on earth. That was until Alcibiades revealed to me that all that matters is just what I most neglect: my personal shortcomings, which cry out for the closest attention. Alcibiades showed me that the opposite of philosophy is to cave in to the desire to please the crowd, to present an acceptable outward form. But the melody of philosophy discloses what is important, what really matters, and to what one should pay attention. And what really matters for us is this: How can we learn once more to do philosophy? How can we turn dialectical arguments and the contemplation of forms away from the hollow satisfactions that they offer to the crowd—the satisfactions of undermining opponents, being cleverer than others, or possessing a special knowledge—so that they become an occasion for giving birth to virtue? How can we turn our attention away from the forms to the music of philosophy? For I fear that nearly all philosophers hitherto have betrayed Socrates. All philosophers have become preoccupied with form at the expense of giving birth to virtue. The Socratic philosopher longs not for immortality of soul, or enduring honor, but for the occasion that is conducive to thought.

Our world is not conducive to thinking. There is too much to distract, to disturb, to absorb. Moreover, our world will always condemn thinking. For each newborn thought, each insight, is out of necessity at variance with common wisdom and expectation. The world has its judgments that prevent attention being directed to the promises offered by newborn insights. Deprived of care and nourishment, there are virtues, insights, and states of the soul that cannot emerge in an unsympathetic atmosphere.

Yet philosophy is love of wisdom, not its possession. We have inverted the world if we believe that the wealth of virtue is something to be possessed. No, the spirit of virtue may come to possess us, on occasion, inseminating us so that we become bearers of its children. Philosophy merely prepares the occasion. It is a spirit that passes between people and the gods, between attention and virtue, between thought and existence, between mind and truth. Philosophy is a messenger that

shuttles back and forth, conveying prayer and sacrifice from thought (for what else can thinking do but attend, and pray, and sacrifice?) while bringing gifts and commands back from the gods to people (for what else can reality do but offer necessities, insights, and virtues to thought?).

And so, my friends, let us hold a symposium to celebrate philosophy as a spiritual exercise. Let us direct our attention to insights that create new perspectives, inspire new ways of thinking, and transform the soul. Let us construct an occasion where true thinking can take place. Let us pursue this spiritual exercise through a kind of mindfulness—purposive attention to the present moment—directed to thinking itself. For there is no true thinking without the spiritual exercise of mindfulness, nor is there any true spiritual exercise without the mindful process of thinking. We will only invite those sympathetic to new thinking. We must safeguard a fertile soil where philosophy can grow.

Here's what we'll do:

- Six of you are invited to present papers on philosophy as a spiritual practice: *Phaedrus*, *Pausanias*, *Eryximachus*, *Aristophanes*, *Agathon*, and *Socrates*, in that order. But we need time for thinking, so we will meet on six separate occasions, some months apart, in a rural retreat in the north of England.
- Each paper must be addressed directly to this audience, to inspire and provoke thought. You must exercise yourselves in thinking, present your own thought, and not represent the work of other philosophers whom you have studied. I'm almost tempted to ban the use of proper names, but I'll let you quote or cite others only if you appropriate their insights into your own thinking. This is philosophy, not scholarship.
- Each speaker will receive in advance a provocative challenge. You may respond in any way you wish, and however you are provoked to think. We are concerned with life and thinking, not with personalities. For this reason, the provocations you receive will be sent anonymously, for only the thinking they raise, and the response you offer, will count. When we meet, an assistant will read out the anonymous provocation, and you can present your papers.
- Each paper will receive a brief response from another among you, to whom the paper must be sent in advance. In your responses, I would invite you not to evaluate what has been said, but to offer a different perspective. For only by seeing matters from different angles at once do we gain any sense of a third dimension or depth.

- The most challenging task of all, perhaps, will be mindful listening. I invite you not to take issue with individual points, but to attend to what matters in each other's papers. What we must build, if this experiment is to work, is a community of shared thinking. We must catalyze each other's thoughts. We must exchange ideas, problems, and concepts. We must form our thoughts in direct response to those of others. And, together, we must introduce the conceptual tools that enable us to think in this way.
- The symposium must be undertaken for its own sake, not for the sake of any publications, any curriculum vitae, any networking, or any grant proposals. Instead, we meet as a group of thinkers and friends. We meet to speak in complete confidentiality and mutual loyalty. The event should be sufficient in itself.
- Finally, we may need a common framework to catalyze each other's ideas. To set you thinking about the nature of contemporary philosophy as a kind of spiritual conduct, I am enclosing a paper written by someone who may be a useful guide to our project [included as an appendix]. There is no need to comment on this: it merely sets a possible agenda for exploring philosophy as a spiritual practice.

I look forward to your papers and our conversations.

Editor's Introduction

And what, you might ask, is a “symposium on philosophy as a spiritual exercise?” Well, that’s the very thing that we wanted to discover. Our only model was taken from a cryptic comment in Plato’s *Seventh Letter* after he had denounced writing about the knowledge of serious matters: “After a long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself.” The earliest philosophical schools used to gather in the gymnasiums of Athens. One can imagine these naked philosophers working out, sweating, teasing, and flirting with each other. One can imagine them pushing themselves to the limit, goading each other on, trying to outdo each other in feats of self-overcoming. And what would be the outcome of such exercises? An overcome self? A few drops of sweat, a few bulging mental muscles, and a spirit of camaraderie? Would there be any victories celebrated over opinion, falsehood, and illusion? Not necessarily, for the gymnasium is just for training. Combat and warfare take place elsewhere.

In this age of personal trainers and life coaches, where are the gymnasiums today where philosophers go to work out in thought? Where does one practice the exercise of the virtues of thinking? Where does one push oneself to the limit, in company with others? You will no doubt direct me to our contemporary universities, with their lecture halls, libraries, personal computers, study rooms, seminar rooms, and colloquia. And I will show you sites of combat and warfare, where most time is spent on gathering resources and planning tactics for the next minor skirmish. *Aristophanes*, in his speech below, recalls the legend of how, when the whole of Corinth was preparing for war, Diogenes “the dog”—a cynic philosopher, who dwelt in a barrel and taught that one should live entirely according to nature in poverty and simplicity—rolled his barrel back and forth through the streets. His exercise was without purpose. Yet it may be taken as a symbol of the philosophical gymnasium: When do we ever take to the streets with the barrels of our thinking?

The symposium reported here was just such an occasion. Since there was no aim to conduct a skirmish, produce an output, or achieve any impact, this was a moment of ascetic rest from the work of the university. How far could a group of thinkers go if they really challenged each other? What would happen if thought went to work on itself, provoking, engaging, teasing, and insulting itself, instead of proceeding soberly on its usual subject matters? Such an undertaking is so rare nowadays that it seems significant enough to publish the proceedings to note the occasion, even if this was not the original intention. Yet publication here is strictly on the understanding that what follows is a witness' statement, a factual account, rather like a laboratory report on an experiment. There is no need to agree with it or contest it. There is no need to praise any wisdom or beauty here, nor to decry any foolishness or ugliness. There is no need to engage with it or repeat it. It is enough to know that this experiment happened. One day, thinking took place in this way . . .

We met as proposed in *Alcibiades'* invitation. All the speakers were selected by *Alcibiades*, and some of them were also known to each other. The contributors have been anonymized. They have been allocated pseudonyms drawn from the speakers in Plato's *Symposium*. But the original characters from Plato's *Symposium* soon became subjects of discussion, so to avoid confusion the pseudonyms have been italicized. The use of pseudonyms is in part to insulate the occasion from any ulterior motives apart from training, so that it could take place under laboratory conditions. Anonymity is part of the methodological suspension that constitutes the experiment as a philosophical exercise: Instead of beginning with doubt, we tried to begin with detachment—nothing but enabling an event of thinking was to matter. It has also been necessary to maintain anonymity to safeguard confidentiality, given certain personal revelations that emerged in the final discussion. For what was not clear to any of us at the outset, but gradually became clear to each speaker in turn, was that they were challenged to think philosophically about their own individual lives: The provocations contained intimate details of their personal lives disguised as hypothetical "scenarios." The reality of these scenarios could be recognized, if at all, only by the individual concerned. Since I broke the rules by giving my own paper in advance and subsequently publishing it in a collection under my own name, I have been charged with editing and publishing the proceedings on behalf of the group.

We did not meet in a gymnasium or a university. *Alcibiades* was our convenor and host. We met on five separate evenings, each several months apart, to hear and discuss the first five papers, as well as for a

longer period for *Socrates*' presentation and the events that followed. While I can do little to describe the participants and still maintain full anonymity, it may assist the reader to imagine the events if I provide minimal details of age and gender. *Alcibiades* is female and of an indeterminate age (I hope that is sufficiently polite); she was assisted by a young lady *Aristodemus*, who read aloud the anonymous provocations that had been emailed out to speakers in advance. The first speech was given by *Phaedrus*, who masqueraded as a somewhat youthful university professor. The second and fifth speeches were given by a young couple, *Pausanias* (male) and *Agathon* (female). *Eryximachus* delivered the third, a charming and handsome man over 40. The older speakers were also both male: *Aristophanes*, a middle-aged man and senior academic, and *Socrates*, of retirement age. *Socrates* spoke a lot about a woman called *Diotima*, but we did not meet her. Otherwise, all the participants have or have had some relation to higher study in British universities. There was hardly a fair balance of gender, age, ethnicity, or occupation, although one not untypical for British philosophy, but the powerful presences of *Alcibiades*, *Agathon*, and *Diotima* compensated in part for that.

The speeches took time for us to digest, and I would encourage any reader to attempt no more than one chapter a day. This is not a book you can skim quickly to extract a position, an argument, or a few key quotations for an essay. It records an attempt to display both heart and soul, and if it speaks of anything important, it speaks to heart and soul, and should be criticized at the level of heart and soul. The first four chapters stand alone and could be read alone, but *Agathon* and *Socrates* engaged significantly with what had been said previously. It should go without saying that I would encourage those few readers who have taken up this book out of a wish to pursue philosophy as a spiritual exercise to listen to whether any of the questions or themes may be addressed to your own life or thought. To provide a manual of mental gymnastics for readers was not, of course, the main intention of the participants, who aimed to work on themselves and each other. Even so, they often sought to deflect the discussion away from their own lives and sometimes reverted to academic norms, providing papers complete with footnotes and references. My other suggestion is to read this with a notebook in hand: if you find your own thinking stimulated, even on tangential issues or in protest against claims made here, then give time to your own thought to develop by writing it down. This is how you may participate in our small community of thinkers; reading, by itself, is insufficient for participation.

Although each speaker was issued with a provocative problem, each speaker chose to focus on their own topics. For *Phaedrus*, the

fundamental problem in philosophy as a spiritual exercise is one of how to bring life into thought, or to bring thinking to life. Such living thought empowers us to work together to face the causes of suffering. For *Pausanias*, the problem is one of how to pay attention to the ends that inspire us without turning them into illusions. His paper expressed a solitary exploration of the meaning of inwardness. *Eryximachus* explored the problem of hypocrisy: as a practice, thinking ought to do what it says. Philosophy is for him an erotic quest for intimacy. *Aristophanes* explored the way in which dispositions and interests of thought can be formed to enhance the mindfulness necessary for moral character. Thinking builds integrity as a basis for justice. *Agathon* tried to give voice to the unique relation of thinking with and for another, in mutual attention, so as to display the potential of a philosophical relationship. For her, thinking is done for another and with another. *Socrates*, partly in conversation with an inner voice or deceased lover named *Diotima*, explored how thinking can engage with death and love, and yet his engaged thought expressed a spirit of equanimity.

Each made some determined effort, to a greater or lesser degree, to leave scholarship behind and to build thinking from what was offered by each other. Since *Phaedrus* gave the first speech, this had the strange effect of stamping the character of his preoccupations, concepts, and themes on the discussion. One might even discern the repetition of some of his grammatical constructions and written style by others, whether in a deliberate attempt at receptivity and malleability or whether in satirical mockery. One can never be sure. Or perhaps the coherence of style and content emerged to display a certain “melody” or “rhythm” of philosophical thinking. The distributed essay, “Philosophy as a Spiritual Exercise,” adapted for the occasion from previous work, may serve as a slightly more rigorous introduction, and it has been included as an appendix. The general reader may fear to tread on this ground, without a solid preparation in mental gymnastics. Yet there is no need to read it as part of the experiment, and although the professional intellectual may be advised to start here to further clarify our agenda, those seeking out the experience of the experiment may skip it without significant loss.

And so, my dear reader, you stand at the threshold of what may be described as an experimental exercise, a performance, and even an ordeal. If you are to join with us, you may have to breathe deeply and work hard to keep up. My hope is that you might find something here a little thought-provoking, something that raises a droplet of sweat.

Acknowledgments

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