

## Article

# Philosophical Practice as Spiritual Exercises towards Truth, Wisdom, and Virtue

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**Abstract:** The concept of spirituality has a long philosophical history. Based on detailed studies of a history of spiritual exercises from Socrates, the Stoics, Epicureanism, to early Christianity, the former catholic priest Pierre Hadot conceives philosophical practice as spiritual exercises in learning how to live a philosophical life. Following this idea, a number of philosophers such as Gerd B. Achenbach started the contemporary movement of philosophical practice in the 1980s, which aimed to apply philosophical theories and methods to discussions about issues people constantly encounter in life, mainly in the forms of philosophical counseling and philosophical therapy. In this paper, after showing that philosophical practice has already become a new frontier in philosophical research, we further argue that philosophical practice as spiritual exercises is an exercise of reason and logos, while certain kinds of religious exercises such as Zen arts can also constitute an important part of philosophical practice. We conclude that in light of the distinct plurality of the methods and modes of philosophical practice and the spiritual exercises involved, philosophical practice can be considered a meaningful and applicable approach to pursuing truth, wisdom, and virtue, which is of great didactic and ethical significance in the post-COVID-19 era.

**Keywords:** philosophical practice; philosophical counseling; philosophical therapy; Pierre Hadot; spiritual exercises; spirituality; religion; truth; wisdom; virtue



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## 1. Introduction

What is the use of philosophy? What can philosophers contribute to others and to society? At the very least, is learning philosophy beneficial to the learners themselves? Such questions probably are what philosophers will often think of and be asked about. In *Fortress Besieged* 圍城, a Chinese novel from the twentieth century, there is a famous scene when Chao Hsin-mei 趙辛媚 satirizes Fang Hung-chien 方鴻漸, who has a philosophical background, by stating that: “In the eyes of those of us engaged in real work, studying philosophy and not studying anything amount to one and the same” (Ch’ien 1980), which indicates that since philosophical knowledge cannot be applied in practical work, the learning of philosophy leads people nowhere and philosophy is thus useless. On the contrary, Feng Youlan 馮友蘭, one of the leading modern Neo-Confucianists, advocated that: “Philosophy can make a man a saint. This is the useless use of philosophy. If becoming a saint is to make the best of people, the useless use of philosophy can also be called great use” (Feng 1986). The answer to the question of whether philosophy is useless, somewhat useful or of great use may vary from person to person, and philosophical practice is a new attempt made by some contemporary philosophers in response to it.

As a significant representative of the application turn of contemporary Western philosophy, philosophical counseling and therapy, as well as other applications of philosophy to daily life, are collectively referred to as philosophical practice (Ding 2016; Achenbach et al. 1984; Li 2007; Marinoff 2002; Raabe 2001). Contemporary philosophical practice originated from a series of philosophical movements launched in Europe in the 1980s, but this does not

mean that philosophical practice is something new. As early as ancient Greece, Rome, India and China, philosophers have begun to play consultative and therapeutic roles within philosophy to a certain extent (Marinoff 1999, 2002, 2017b, 2020). The source of philosophy as a theoretical inquiry which mainly relies on conceptual analysis and rigorous argumentation can be found in Plato, although even he had endeavored to test his philosopher-king thesis and put “The State” into practice in Syracuse as an advisor of Dionysius II (Burnyeat and Frede 2015). Although this “armchair philosophy” has established a powerful kingdom of thought for humankind through systematic logical reasoning and abstract speculation, many people are dissatisfied with its increasing isolation and detachment from the general public and everyday life. Thus, philosophical practice results from the idea that philosophy should move toward ordinary people in response to their dissatisfaction with traditional academic philosophy.

Philosophical practice is obviously an endeavor to combine philosophy with people’s daily life. Robertson (1998) believes that, like applied ethics, philosophical practice is a subcategory of applied philosophy. In philosophical practice, the practitioners and the visitors deal with private and concrete life issues. The practitioners use a range of philosophical techniques inspired by academic philosophy in order to make their dialogues with the visitors genuinely philosophical. Through philosophical means, such as the use of philosophical theories or methods, a trained philosophical practitioner often helps to examine the visitors’ beliefs and to improve their ways of thinking, helping the visitors to gain insights into their own experiences so that they can learn to think in a philosophical way. Therefore, while philosophical practitioners can help people deal with practical or existential issues in life, the ultimate aim is to help people further understand themselves, improve themselves, and gain inner peace and tranquility.

The German philosopher Gerd B. Achenbach founded the first institution of philosophical practice in 1981 in Bergisch Gladbach, an event that is often seen as marking the beginning of the philosophical practice movement (Achenbach et al. 1984; Achenbach 2010). At the beginning of the 21st century, Lou Marinoff’s book *Plato, Not Prozac!: Applying Eternal Wisdom to Everyday Problems* (Marinoff 1999) became a best-seller, which made philosophical practice rapidly become popular among the general public in the US, even though Marinoff himself and his theory and practice of philosophical counseling were controversial (Marinoff 2017a). As the book’s title suggests, Marinoff (1999) rejected the over-medicalization and over-medication prevalent in traditional psychotherapy and instead advocated a philosophical approach to helping people accordingly.

Inspired by Kuhn (1970), Harteloh (2013b) regards philosophical practice as an emerging paradigm in Western philosophy, which is shown by the emergence of recognized philosophical practitioners, representative philosophical practice theories and methods, specialized philosophical practice organizations, journals for publishing papers on philosophical practice, regularly held academic conferences, professional training and college education, etc. Under the traditional “armchair philosophy” paradigm, many academic philosophers are obsessed with profound thinking and argumentation on metaphysics and epistemology, using abstract or even obscure terminologies to expound their philosophical ideas. In contrast, people who do not have the corresponding philosophical background often cannot comprehend these philosophical theories, and even fellow philosophers may not be able to communicate with each other without obstacles in terms of concepts and theories. Such theoretical work in philosophy undoubtedly has its positive significance, but the philosophers’ philosophical theories and methods can hardly penetrate their own ways of life or provide guidance and help for others to understand the world. Therefore, the limitation of such philosophical research is obvious, which is partly why philosophy’s progress is often less visible and less direct than natural science (Bourget and Chalmers 2014, 2021; Callard 2020; Chalmers 2015; Dietrich 2011).

Since Gerd B. Achenbach founded the first philosophical practice organization, the Internationale Gesellschaft für Philosophische Praxis (IGPP), in 1982, philosophical practice has rapidly gained acceptance and popularity on the European continent, and it especially took roots and continued to flourish in the Netherlands. The number of philosophical practitioners and regional organizations had experienced explosive growth, while more visitors began to appear at the institutions of philosophical practice, and philosophical practice also received a great deal of attention and coverage in the media worldwide (Marinoff 2017a). Significantly, philosophical practice brings a new way of looking at philosophy (Gestalt switch/shift) that is often incompatible with the academic one, which can be shown in the recognition of certain philosophers or personal involvements that are neglected or denied in academic philosophy but considered essential in philosophical practice. For example, Michel de Montaigne, one of the most important thinkers and essayists of the French Renaissance, was regarded as an outstanding pioneer of philosophical practice by Gerd B. Achenbach. Achenbach enthusiastically argues that it is almost never the Kantian question “how shall I live” which moves the visitor of philosophical practice, but more often the question of Montaigne “what am I actually doing” (Achenbach et al. 1984). However, in academic philosophy, the significance of Montaigne is not highly valued as such, and the interpretation of his essays is also conducted in a different way.

The preliminary formation of philosophical practice as a new frontier is reflected in the following landmark event: the First International Conference on Philosophical Practice (ICPP) was co-organized by Ran Lahav and Lou Marinoff in Canada in 1994. It was attended by 55 philosophical practitioners from all around the world. Since then, the ICPP has been held every two or three years worldwide. In the ICPP meetings, people can often witness emotional discussions among philosophical practitioners about issues such as who can be qualified as philosophical practitioners in history and in the future, what is the definition of philosophical practice, what are the goals and roles of philosophical practice, what is the relationship between philosophical practice and psychological counseling, what are the methods of philosophical practice, etc. All these discussions have constituted the foundational discourses in philosophical practice and are still in hot debate.

Notably, one of the foundational discussions among practitioners is the nature of philosophical practice: problem-solving (Amir 2004; Robertson 1998), worldview interpretation (Lahav 1995), philosophical care of the self (Schuster 1997a, 1997b), conceptual art (Grosso 2012), critical thinking (LeBon 2007; Walsh 2005), wisdom inspiration (Lahav 2006; Staude 2015), spiritual exercises (Davidson 1990; Hadot 1995, 2002), etc. Most remarkably, there is great controversy as to the role of spiritual exercises in philosophical practice: to what extent the activities in philosophical practice can be considered spiritual exercises. We can obviously see a dilemma here: some consider philosophical practice as a spiritual exercise, while others do not. A prominent representative in this debate is John Cooper, with his influential and even more controversial criticism of Pierre Hadot.

Based on St. Ignatius of Loyola’s *Exercitia Spiritualia*, and combined with detailed studies of a history of spiritual exercises from Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, to early Christianity, Hadot (1995, 2002) regards spiritual exercises in ancient philosophy as exercises in learning how to live a philosophical life and emphasizes the different conceptions of philosophy that have accompanied the trajectory and fate of the theory and practice of spiritual exercises (Davidson 1990). However, Cooper (2007) criticizes that Hadot’s conception of spirituality subordinates rational inquiry to the cultivation of intense states of emotional conviction and that Hadot’s understanding of philosophy as an “existential option” risks providing a voluntaristic or even irrationalist account of philosophical practice, which makes spiritual exercises become distractions from the cultivation of reason (Del Nido 2018). Many researchers have argued against Cooper’s distinction between religion and philosophy and defended Hadot’s conception of philosophical practice as spiritual exercises (Del Nido 2018; Grimm and Cohoe 2021; Kamtekar 2014; Sellars 2014).

In this paper, we will firstly present the theoretical and practical aspects of philosophical practice. Through a literature review, we will show that philosophical practice has turned into a new frontier in philosophical research, which covers various topics ranging from the resources, definitions, uniqueness, methods, goals, and some institutional issues of philosophical practice. Furthermore, we will identify philosophical practice as spiritual exercises in the broad sense, which is not limited to religion and tradition, and in the narrow sense, which is constrained to the exercises of reason and logos. Particularly, we will characterize the orientations of spiritual exercises in philosophical practice and argue that philosophical practice could be used as a meaningful and applicable approach to pursuing truth, wisdom, and virtue, which is of great didactic and ethical significance in the post-COVID-19 era (Damianos and Damianou 2020; Feary 2020; Munroe 2020; Repetti 2020). It should be noted that, for the convenience of argumentation, we will use the terms philosophical practice, philosophical counseling, and philosophical therapy interchangeably in this paper when the differences between them are not significant.

## 2. Philosophical Practice as a New Frontier in Philosophical Research: Literature Review

According to Ding (2016), philosophical practice research worldwide generally covers six aspects. The first is the historical intellectual resources of philosophical practice, i.e., the practical wisdom of Eastern and Western philosophers. This part of the research focuses on the inspiring philosophers and philosophical schools that have provided the intellectual resources and support for the legitimacy of contemporary philosophical practice by clarifying its theoretical origins and intellectual transmission. By exploring the philosophical thoughts of Socrates, Aristotle, Epicurus, the Stoics, and early Christianity, Hadot (1995) summarizes philosophy as a way of life, arguing that philosophy calls for people to strive to obtain wisdom through spiritual exercises. In line with Hadot (1995), Ferraiolo (2010) points out that although Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, two representatives of the Stoics, were a slave and an emperor, their ideas on self-control can help modern people deal rationally and effectively with the inevitable and uncontrollable ups and downs of life, so that people can achieve inner peace and live a good life. Fatic (2014), on the other hand, argues that Epicureanism as a universal philosophy of life can be a powerful tool for addressing issues related to emotions and meaning in philosophical counseling.

In addition to ancient philosophers, many modern philosophers have also contributed profound theoretical and intellectual resources to philosophical counseling. Robertson (1998) argues that contemporary philosophical counseling draws much inspiration from the philosophical thoughts of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Martin Buber, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein, among others. Spivak (2004) points out that Søren Aabye Kierkegaard's philosophical thoughts on human freedom have strong explanatory power and relevance for philosophical counseling. In comparison, Shusterman (1997), by examining the philosophical theories and philosophical life of pragmatists such as John Dewey, Nelson Goodman, Richard Rorty, and Hilary Whitehall Putnam, proposes that philosophy should be used to analyze and guide individual lives and make people better off.

The second aspect is the definition of concepts related to philosophical practice, such as philosophical counseling, philosophical therapy, academic philosophy, and philosophical pedagogy. As with the question, "What is philosophy?", the answer to the question, "What is philosophical counseling?" is also inconclusive. Most philosophers have tried to define philosophical counseling indirectly from their own perspectives around its objects, methods, and goals. Amir (2004) directly equates philosophical counseling with its methods, arguing that philosophical counseling is a collection of methods that addresses the issues and dilemmas of everyday life in a philosophical way. Lahav (1995), on the other hand, sees philosophical counseling as a worldview interpretation and argues that different philosophical counseling has different approaches to worldview interpretation. Schuster (1997a, 1997b) claims that philosophical counseling means that the philosoph-

ical counselors and the visitors philosophize about the visitors' self in an autonomous discussion.

The third aspect is the goals and roles of philosophical practice. Most researchers believe that the purpose of philosophical counseling is to solve the problems encountered by the visitors and to relieve the perplexities in their minds (Lahav 1995; Amir 2004). Grosso (2012) sees philosophical counseling as a conceptual art and believes that the purpose of philosophical counseling is to help the visitors see their problems in a new way so that they can overcome these problems in a new way. Tsuchiya and Miyata (2015), on the other hand, regard philosophical counseling as a viable tool for developing children's intellectual virtues in Philosophy for Children (P4C). In addition to the training of ways of thinking and the search for wisdom, other researchers claim that philosophical counseling is also an important way of teaching moral virtues. Jones (2012) sees cabaret comedy as a form of philosophical counseling, in which the performers educate the audience about morality by telling a personal story with universal meaning. However, Tuedio (2003) points out that philosophical counseling does not make any commitment to the ultimate utilitarian effect and that the philosophers' only responsibility is to keep further inquiring.

The fourth aspect is the relationship between philosophical practice and other helping disciplines or professions such as psychological counseling and therapy. An important mission of contemporary philosophical practice at the beginning of its emergence was to challenge the theoretical presuppositions as well as the methods and effects of psychological counseling and therapy. Most researchers consider philosophical counseling an alternative to psychological counseling and therapy, aiming at providing people with guidance for rational living independently and avoiding the use of any psychotherapeutic means (Achenbach 1998; Marinoff 2002; Raabe 2010). However, Russell (2001) argues that there is no clear and unambiguous distinction between philosophical counseling and psychotherapy if only by comparing what philosophical counselors and psychotherapists both do and why they do it. Amir (2004) also points out that a decisive part of philosophical counseling is the relevant psychological knowledge and experience of the philosophical counselors; otherwise, the philosophical counselors will most likely be lost in their own philosophical labyrinth.

Cohen (2013) argues that although philosophical counseling is not a complete substitute for psychotherapy, psychotherapists need to use philosophical counseling to provide visitors with more effective and profound ways to alleviate their mental disorders; therefore, they see philosophical counseling as a complementary tool to psychotherapy. Mills (2001) further points out that philosophical counseling is a form of psychotherapy, but it needs structure and guidance to develop into a reliable approach to psychological problems, i.e., a theoretical and practical "philosophical-psychological" paradigm.

The fifth aspect is different methods and modes of philosophical practice, which is the most frequently discussed theme in the field of philosophical practice. Just like in every other emerging discipline, researchers like to classify philosophical practice into different modes, using a variety of methods that they find "useful" as vehicles for their counseling practice, depending on the philosophical resources (e.g., relevant philosophical concepts, theories, and methods from the history of philosophy in the East and West) to which they have recourse. If we discuss philosophical practice in a general sense, there could be as many modes as we want, and thus philosophical practice exhibits a distinct methodological plurality (see Table 1). Some of the more established approaches in contemporary philosophical practice include, but are not limited to, spiritual exercises (Hadot 1995), the existential approach (Russell 2001), the PEACE process (Marinoff 2002), the FITT stages (Raabe 2001), the Roman Stoic approach (Lahav 2009), the neo-Socratic dialogue (Brenifier 2020; Littig 2010; Nelson 1949), the IDEA method (Ferraiolo 2010), logic-based therapy (Cohen 2013), issues tree (Raabe 2013), Epicurean ethics (Fatic 2014), humor (Amir 2014), and poetry (Rolf 2015). All of these modes can help the visitors tune out the external distractions and focus on their minds (and bodies), leading to a possible equilibrium in the end.



**Table 1.** Dominant theories/modes in philosophical practice.

Names of Theories/Modes	Stages/Steps	Main Sources/Authors
Neo-Socratic Dialogue	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identifying or deepening;</li> <li>2. Criticizing or problematizing;</li> <li>3. Abstraction or conceptualizing.</li> </ol>	(Brenifier 2020; Littig 2010; Nelson 1949)
PEACE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Problem identification;</li> <li>2. Exploration of emotions arising from this problem;</li> <li>3. Analysis (questions, interpretations, and options to resolve the problem);</li> <li>4. Contemplation on the integral situation;</li> <li>5. Equilibrium (coming to inner peace and ataraxia).</li> </ol>	(Marinoff 1999, 2002)
Logic-Based Therapy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify the counselee's emotional reasoning;</li> <li>2. Identify any irrational premises;</li> <li>3. Refute any irrational premises;</li> <li>4. Find antidotes to the refuted premises;</li> <li>5. Exercise willpower in overcoming cognitive dissonance.</li> </ol>	(Cohen 2013)
FITT	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Free floating;</li> <li>2. Immediate problem resolution;</li> <li>3. Teaching as an intentional act;</li> <li>4. Transcendence.</li> </ol>	(Raabe 1999, 2001)
IDEA	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify the real issue;</li> <li>2. Distinguish "Internals" from "Externals";</li> <li>3. Exert effort only where it can be effective;</li> <li>4. Accept the rest.</li> </ol>	(Ferraiolo 2010)
Teleological-Narrative Model	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Micro-procedure of narrative philosophical practice (intention, action, and setting);</li> <li>2. Practical inference (self, action, and purpose);</li> <li>3. Macro-procedure of narrative philosophical practice (long-term intention).</li> </ol>	(Rhee 2015)
C.I.S.A.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consciousness (self-consciousness, perceiving others, relation consciousness);</li> <li>2. Insight (hierarchical argument, conditional statement, framework type, question-mode argument, the developing type, crossing type);</li> <li>3. Spiritual moving (self-inspection, spiritual resupination, self-irony);</li> <li>4. Ascend (to transcend the status quo, e.g., mood and values).</li> </ol>	(Li 2007, 2015)

The sixth aspect is the entry requirements, training methods, curriculum planning, value norms, and ethical codes for the philosophical counseling profession. Since philosophical counseling is a relatively young profession that is still maturing and improving, a number of practical issues related to the operation and development of the profession have received the attention of many researchers. Hoffman (2003) offers a pertinent plan for the future of philosophical counselors and philosophical counseling organizations. Jopling (1997) cautions the public about the dangers that philosophical counseling can present in certain situations. Mills (1999) provides a review of the guidelines for philosophical counseling issued by the Canadian Society for Philosophical Practice (CSPP), American Philosophical Practitioners Association (APPA), and American Society for Philosophy, Counseling and

Psychotherapy (ASPCP) and points out many ambiguities existing in the professional codes of ethics for philosophical counselors. [Schuster \(1995\)](#), on the other hand, offers some practical advice for philosophical counselors in the United States who are concerned about legal liability.

### 3. Philosophical Practice as Spiritual Exercises

Despite the pluralistic views toward the nature of philosophical practice that we have seen, an important question that we are going to explore in this paper is to what extent the activities in philosophical practice can be considered spiritual exercises. The concept of spirituality has a long philosophical history. [Feary \(2014\)](#) outlines some philosophical concepts and theories associated with dimensions of spirituality and introduced how spirituality has been variously treated as a way of achieving transcendent vision (Plato and Plotinus), as a method of attaining serenity (Stoicism and Epicureanism), as demonstrating hope and forgiveness (Christianity), as a way of experiencing the sacred (Paul Ricoeur and Hinduism), as connected to the Sublime (Kant and Lyotard), as moral community (Kantian respect, Buddhist compassion, and Feminist caring), and as involving our relationship with the world of nature (Transcendentalism, Native American philosophies), all of which can be used in philosophical counseling with visitors in crisis.

Due to the manifold aspects of theories and the large scope of practices, philosophical practice has long been regarded as an important way of, or even in some sense the same thing as, spiritual exercises. The eminent French philosopher Pierre Hadot presents a history of spiritual exercises from Socrates to early Christianity and a discussion of the various conceptions of philosophy that have accompanied the trajectory and fate of the theory and practice of spiritual exercises ([Davidson 1990](#)). Hadot considers Socrates, a master of dialogue with others and of dialogue with himself, as the first clear illustration of the practice of spiritual exercises and proposes that every spiritual exercise should be “dialogical” because it is an “exercise of authentic presence” of the self to itself and of the self to others, which “constitutes the basis of all spiritual exercise” ([Davidson 1990](#)). Furthermore, Hadot investigates thoroughly how Stoicism and Epicureanism help cure people’s passions, which are supposed to be the principal cause of human suffering (e.g., disorderly desires and exaggerated fears), aiming at a total transformation of one’s way of being ([Davidson 1990](#)). Hadot especially emphasizes philosophy’s image as an “exercise for death” through Stoicism, Epicureanism, Plotinus, Neoplatonism, and early Christianity, all of which allow one to see the human world “from above” and elevate thoughts to “the perspective of the Whole” ([Davidson 1990](#)).

In the following, to respond to certain critics of Pierre Hadot and to clarify some possible confusions, we will identify philosophical practice as spiritual exercises both in the broad sense, which is not limited to religion and tradition, and also in the narrow sense, which is constrained to the exercises of reason and logos.

#### 3.1. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Pierre Hadot and His Critics*

Pierre Hadot, although not a philosophical practitioner in the strict sense, is the most important advocate of the notions of “spiritual exercises” and “philosophy as a way of life” in ancient philosophy ([Hadot 1995](#)). Hadot was a catholic priest for about six years (1944–1950), and his use of the term spiritual exercise can undoubtedly be traced back to his personal life history, which was in accord with philosophical practice’s requirement of biographical elements for interpreting philosophy. Although Hadot acknowledged that his use of the term “spiritual exercises” may create anxieties by associating philosophical practices more closely with religious devotion than typically performed, he intended to capture how spiritual exercises, such as devotional practices in the religious traditions, were aimed at generating and reactivating a constant way of living and a higher perception the world, despite all the distractions, temptations, and difficulties in life ([Sharpe 2022](#)). Moreover, Hadot distinguished two lists of spiritual exercises, which do not completely overlap, but provided us a fairly complete panorama of Stoico-Platonic-inspired philosoph-

ical therapeutics that demanded daily or continuous repetition of practice: firstly, there is research (*zetesis*), thorough investigation (*skepsis*), reading (*anagnosis*), listening (*akroasis*), attention (*prosoche*), self-mastery (*enkrateia*), and indifference to indifferent things; secondly, there is reading, meditations (*meletai*), therapies of the passions, remembrance of good things, self-mastery, and the accomplishment of duties (Hadot 1995, p. 84).

Philosophy was once all-encompassing and used to be a form of common wisdom for a long time. According to Hadot, with the eventual outlawing of the ancient philosophical schools, philosophers' dialectical techniques and metaphysical views were integrated and subordinated, first to forms of Christian monasticism and then, later, to the modern natural sciences, and the conception of ancient philosophy as a way of life has largely disappeared from the West (Sharpe 2022). In the meantime, philosophy withdrew to universities and became hard to reach for ordinary people. However, Hadot maintained that the conception of philosophy as a way of life has never completely disappeared from the West, resurfacing in Montaigne, Rousseau, Goethe, Thoreau, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer, and even in the works of Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, and Heidegger (Sharpe 2022). Therefore, philosophical practice is, in fact, the common conception of philosophy, a return of philosophy to its origin as a source of consolation, autonomy, and peace of mind.

Rabbow (1954) situated *Exercitia Spiritualia* back within the ancient tradition (Hadot 1995, p. 109) and gave a remarkable analysis of the exercises practiced by the Stoics and Epicureans (Hadot 1995, pp. 126–27). For Hadot, spiritual exercises include not only practices of reading, listening, dialogue, inquiry, and research, but also others such as fasting or bodily exercise, which are not simply or primarily “intellectual”, therefore Hadot’s use of the word “spirituality” is in much wider scope (Sharpe 2020), which is quite apt to make us understand that these exercises are the result, not merely of thought, but of the individual’s entire psychism (Hadot 1995, p. 82). Actually, spiritual exercises in Hadot’s sense correspond to a transformation of our personality and our perception of the world by the individual’s raising himself up to the life of the objective Spirit and re-placing himself within the perspective of the Whole (Hadot 1995, p. 82), which will finally lead to wisdom, a state of complete liberation from the passions, utter lucidity, knowledge of ourselves, and of the world (Hadot 1995, p. 103).

However, the idea of conceiving philosophical practice as spiritual exercises is controversial. John Cooper argues that the concept of spiritual exercises as Hadot develops it has distorted the genuine nature of ancient philosophical practice because Hadot erred in claiming that “spiritual exercises” are pervasive among ancient philosophers and central to their ways of life, while, in fact, this judgment only applies to certain Roman (and particularly Neoplatonic) philosophers and are thus far less central to ancient philosophy than Hadot has claimed (Cooper 2007, 2012). Furthermore, Cooper goes on to criticize that Hadot’s language of spirituality and the associated idea that becoming a philosopher entails a personal choice import existentialist concerns with the state of one’s self that are at odds with ancient philosophy’s commitment to the use of one’s reason as the sole basis for one’s way of life (Del Nido 2018; Grimm and Cohoe 2021). Most important of all, since the term “spiritual exercises” originates from St. Ignatius of Loyola’s *Exercitia Spiritualia*, Cooper doubts that St. Ignatius’ spiritual exercises, which focus on ends and are imaginative or rhetorical, can inspire devotion to sacred texts or “intense feelings of conviction” by which we understand ourselves and how we ought to live (Cooper 2012; Del Nido 2018; Moberg and Calkins 2001).

Correspondingly, in defense of Hadot, Del Nido (2018) argues that Hadot has provided a compelling argument that through employing imaginative, rhetorical, and cognitive techniques, spiritual exercises are both necessary for and successful at producing a subject in which reason is integrated into human character, and the concept of spiritual exercises remains a viable component of theoretical frameworks for the study of religious ethics. Del Nido (2018) also identifies Hadot’s distinction between two broad categories of spiritual exercises: “concentration of the self”, which turns our attention from our everyday concerns back to our own selves, and “expansion of the self”, which applies the doctrines, arguments,



and methods of a philosophical school in one's everyday life such that they form part of one's character (Hadot 1995).

Grimm and Cohoe (2021) further clarify the nature of spiritual exercises and explore a number of fundamental questions, such as the distinction between the discerning and motivational powers of reason, and conclude that spiritual exercises figure crucially in the idea of philosophy as a way of life, not just in the ancient world but also today. Grimm and Cohoe (2021) earnestly remind readers to understand the concept of spiritual exercises in the broad sense of St. Ignatius of Loyola and Pierre Hadot, which includes not only "devotional" acts such as meditating on one's sins or the life of Christ, but also almost any practice focused on ridding the soul of disordered attachments, and thus on bringing the various elements of the soul into proper alignment. When spiritual exercises are understood in the broad sense as encompassing a rich panoply of training, exercises, argument, discussion, and so on (Grimm and Cohoe 2021), the different practices of spiritual exercises in philosophical practice can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Different practices of spiritual exercises in philosophical practice.

Names of Practices	Conditions/Subcategories/Stages/Steps	Main Sources/Authors
Philosophical Café	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Wherever there are eternal puzzles and provocations of the soul;</li> <li>2. Wherever there is a free and spontaneous chance to ask questions about the great riddles of life;</li> <li>3. Wherever there is a clearing for philosophizing in a friendly social context, without disruption of cost, constraint, leader, master, or guru.</li> </ol>	(Ding 2019; Grosso 2002; Marinoff 1999, 2002; Phillips 2001; Sauté 1995)
Philosophical walk	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Preparation (selecting quotations and/or designing a route);</li> <li>2. Instruction of the participants (ground rule: "we walk or we talk");</li> <li>3. Walking along the route;</li> <li>4. Stop at place of conceptualization (choosing a spot);</li> <li>5. Questioning of the participant who calls for a stop (just questions, no answers);</li> <li>6. Choose a question ("the best question");</li> <li>7. Take a picture on the spot of conceptualization for analysis and/or group discussion;</li> <li>8. Continue the walk;</li> <li>9. Group discussion (reflection and narrative abstraction).</li> </ol>	(Harteloh 2013a, 2021)
Meditation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Active meditation (trains of thoughts pulled and pushed by varieties of logical, ontological, epistemological, axiological engines; endeavors to force solutions by generating kinetic energy of thoughts);</li> <li>2. Inactive meditation (bringing the mind to a quiescent state or alert repose through Zazen, Yoga, Tai Chi, or Chi Kung; endeavors to coax forth solutions by accruing potential energy of quiescence).</li> </ol>	(Marinoff 1999, 2002)
Philosophical Contemplation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Gentle reading;</li> <li>2. Philosophical note;</li> <li>3. Calligraphic contemplation;</li> <li>4. Essential list;</li> <li>5. Recitation (rumination);</li> <li>6. Philosophical mapping;</li> <li>7. Inner conversation with a text;</li> <li>8. Free-floating reading;</li> <li>9. Guided philosophical imagery.</li> </ol>	(Lahav 2018, 2021)

Table 2. Cont.

Names of Practices	Conditions/Subcategories/Stages/Steps	Main Sources/Authors
Bibliotherapy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Visitors read the appropriate philosophical texts (e.g., <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>, <i>Bhagavad Gita</i>, <i>I Ching</i>, and <i>Tao Te Ching</i>);</li> <li>2. Visitors discuss their resulting ideas with the philosophical counselors.</li> </ol>	(Marinoff 1999, 2002)
Zen Arts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Aikido, Judo, Kendo, and Kyodo (the way of the samurai);</li> <li>2. Calligraphy and poetry (language power);</li> <li>3. Rock gardens and flower arranging (sacred spaces);</li> <li>4. Tea ceremonies (freeing the senses to awaken the spirits).</li> </ol>	(Baggott 2005)

Notably, through conducting psychological and spiritual measures in conjunction with functional connectivity analysis of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) in 14 individuals prior to and following shortly after their participation in a one-week spiritual retreat of St. Ignatius, which utilizes a variety of elements, including living in silence, performing prayer and meditation, and personal reflection, Wintering et al. (2020) observed significant changes in brain functional connectivity, particularly in the posterior cingulate cortex, pallidum, superior frontal lobe, superior parietal lobe, superior and inferior temporal lobe, and the cerebellum. However, it should be emphasized that the effects of meditation and Zen arts (see Table 2) are controversial. Although Tang et al. (2015) propose that the mechanism through which mindfulness meditation exerts its effects is a process of enhanced self-regulation, including attention control, emotion regulation, and self-awareness, they also point out that research on mindfulness meditation faces a number of important challenges in study design that limit the interpretation of existing studies.

### 3.2. Characteristics of Spiritual Exercises in Philosophical Practice

In philosophical practice, spirituality means attaining a life in accordance with one's ideas. For Hadot, a spiritual exercise is a practice, a common action that is in correspondence with an idea. In his opinion, "what's interesting about the idea of spiritual exercises is precisely that it is not a matter of a purely rational consideration, but the putting in action of all kinds of means, intended to act upon one's self. Imagination and affectivity play a capital role here: we must represent to ourselves in vivid colors the dangers of such-and-such a passion, and use striking formulations of ideas in order to exhort ourselves. We must also create habits, and fortify ourselves by preparing ourselves against hardships in advance" (Hadot 1995, p. 284). Through practicing and exercising these techniques and learning to see things "from above", rational knowledge may become force and will and thereby become extremely efficacious against passion, especially in crisis situations (Hadot 1995, p. 284).

To identify philosophical practice as spiritual exercises in the broad sense and also in the narrow sense, and to distinguish a "philosophical" way of life from a life guided by religion, tradition, or some other source alone (Grimm and Cohoe 2021), the following three characteristics of philosophical practice should be noticed, which guarantee that the spiritual exercises therein are philosophical fundamentally, although a philosophical practice does not have to possess all the three characteristics at the same time.

#### 3.2.1. Truth-Orientation

Lahav (2006) maintains that Plato's cave allegory is a wonderful metaphor for philosophical practice, according to which most of us live like cave-dwellers who can see only the shadows displayed on the wall and believe that the shadows are reality itself. However, the philosophers attempt to help "modern cave-dwellers" like us transcend the realm of shadows and arouse in their hearts new yearnings: to get out of the cave and get closer to the light, which for Plato is the Beautiful, the True, and the Real. This platonic vision of

philosophical practice claims that the power that compels the cave-dwellers to turn around and see the fire behind their back, or even to get out of the cave and see the sun, is the Platonic Eros: a yearning to encounter the Real, to achieve a more truthful understanding of reality (Lahav 2006).

Grimm and Cohoe (2021) emphasize the distinction between spiritual exercises that are truth-directed and those that are not and claim that only those exercises that are truth-directed would then count as exercises that work in tandem with reason, while philosophical practice hence can only be regarded as spiritual exercises in this strict sense. We have listed different practices of spiritual exercises in philosophical practice in Table 2, but whether they are genuinely philosophical or not could be questionable, the answer to which actually depends on the nature of these practices. Grimm and Cohoe (2021) provide an example of playing violent video games, which would count as a spiritual exercise in a broad sense because it would shape the way the various parts of the soul interact with one another (e.g., feeding our anger or impulsiveness), but it would not be a spiritual exercise in the strict sense because it would be a non-truth-directed spiritual exercise: it would prompt us to see things that are not there or to fail to see things that are there. To sum up, the non-truth-directed spiritual exercises promote value illusions, while the truth-directed spiritual exercises help promote value fidelity and help us see and evaluate things as they really are (Grimm and Cohoe 2021).

Therefore, when considering whether any practice such as Philosophical Café, Philosophical walk, Meditation, Philosophical Contemplation, Bibliotherapy, or Zen Arts, can count as spiritual exercises in this strict sense, we could therefore investigate whether this practice is reliably truth-directed and if the answer is Yes, then we should be open-minded about what counts and what does not (Grimm and Cohoe 2021). More specifically, Grimm and Cohoe (2021) further indicate that not only philosophical practice as spiritual exercises arouses in our hearts the yearning for truth but also allows us to assimilate what we have already judged true and practice applying it in different ways and in different contexts so that our grasp of practical truths becomes more firm and lasting, and philosophical practice would help to ensure that the knowledge yielded by reason is not just superficial knowledge, but knowledge “in the bones”, as noted by Aristotle.

### 3.2.2. Wisdom-Orientation

For Pierre Hadot, the goal of philosophical practice as spiritual exercises is wisdom itself, and genuine wisdom will not only lead people to truth and knowledge but also help people see the world and exist in the world in a different way. Hadot’s study of Hellenistic and Roman thoughts brought the practical wisdom of ancient philosophy back to the forefront of the modern world’s attention, and Hadot himself thus became an inspirational mentor to many subsequent philosophical practitioners. Davidson (1990) further holds that while spiritual progress of philosophy towards wisdom brings about tranquility of the soul, self-sufficiency, and cosmic consciousness, these three goals of the philosophical way of life all require the practice of spiritual exercises of self-transformation in order to be attained: tranquility of the soul (ataraxia) results from the philosophical therapeutics intended to cure anxiety; self-sufficiency (autarkeia), the state in which the self depends only on itself, demands a methodical transformation of oneself; cosmic consciousness is a kind of spiritual surpassing of oneself that requires a consciousness of being part of the cosmic whole.

Interestingly, in a philosophical walk at Nanjing University Campus, on 25 May 2013, a quotation from *Bhagavad Gita*, “The wise sees knowledge and action as one. They see truly”, was conceptualized as “Wisdom”, and the reflection and narrative abstraction during the group discussion clearly exhibited wisdom as a practice, a way of life (Harteloh 2021). Besides walking, by analyzing *Phaedrus* and *The Seventh Letter*, in which Plato quotes writing and its relation to philosophical thoughts, and by using the research by Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot, who relate ancient philosophy to the concept of spiritual exercises in which writing is inserted, Medeiros and Araújo (2020) prove the positive role for writing

within the philosophical experience, i.e., a spiritual exercise as a didactic instrument in philosophy class that leads the students to a dialogue in which the teaching of philosophy is presented as a concept workshop.

It is noteworthy that some philosophical practitioners oppose any external utilitarian goal requirements for philosophical practice. [Staupe \(2015\)](#) argues that philosophical practice is neither a therapy nor an applied philosophy. In his view, as Aristotle distinguishes between praxis and poesis, philosophical practice is a practical wisdom (phronesis) rather than a technique (techne), and therefore philosophical practice as a mind-opening dialogue cannot be aimed at any particular outcome. Nevertheless, [Staupe \(2015\)](#) acknowledges that philosophical practice has a power that makes it potentially therapeutic and that the reflections, questions, and perspectives in the process of philosophical practice can have an impact on visitors and their daily lives, allowing them to gain vivification and inner freedom.

As the founder of philosophical practice in Europe, [Achenbach \(1998\)](#) believes that the goal of philosophical practice is to make the visitors wise and that the role of philosophical analysis in counseling is to open the visitors' eyes to the field of meaning that constitutes our practical reality and contains all things. Similarly, [Lahav \(2001\)](#) asserts that philosophical counseling is a private journey through the world of ideas with the goal of wisdom, which addresses the original ancient Greek meaning of the word "philosophy" (philo-sophia): love of wisdom. However, in the current technological, utilitarian, comfort-seeking, and self-centered era, the ancient pursuit of wisdom has been almost completely forgotten. Although [Lahav \(2001\)](#) initially believed that the goal of philosophical counseling was to help visitors interpret and examine their worldviews, to help visitors develop a richer philosophical understanding of the self and the external world, and to empower visitors to better cope with the particular personal crises that beset them at the moment, philosophical counseling in this understanding failed to realize the full potential of philosophizing in people's lives. This approach to philosophical counseling is limited to exploring the visitors' own philosophy of life, focusing only on the visitors' specific attitudes and not going beyond the realm of the visitors' real life. Thus, the philosophical counselors fail to develop new perspectives, concepts, and meanings for the visitors and also fail to help the visitors transcend their previous ways of being. Essentially, philosophical practice aims at broadening and deepening the visitors' life, not just helping them solve particular problems.

In Lahav's view, wisdom means being open to a broader world rather than being limited to a narrow self. Wisdom is not a tool to help us analyze, simplify, and solve problems; rather, wisdom allows us to see the complexity of human reality and its diversity of meanings, aspects, and perspectives, which are the sources of wisdom's appeal, but which also lead to the difficulty of practicing wisdom ([Lahav 2006](#)). The goal of philosophical practice is to create in visitors a desire for wisdom and move them beyond their limited and superficial self-understanding, concerns, and desires. The essence of philosophical practice thus lies in revealing the conceptual basis of the world: the various meanings and the true meaning of concepts about freedom, self, sin, success, value, truth, and wisdom ([Lahav 2001](#)). Therefore, wise men must consider the world to be rich in meaning, or in other words, they interpret their worlds as rich, well-developed networks of what is important, brave, interesting, false, mediocre, and cowardly, of the value in our various experiences and where we stand in the world, of the ethical and aesthetic implications of our actions, and of how these issues are interrelated with each other. Such enrichment and development of worldview interpretations are intrinsically valuable, even if they may sometimes not actually address the specific problems that people are concerned with. In short, philosophical practice seeks to develop and refine people's philosophical sensitivity through dialogues about the meanings of everyday life, which can have a variety of therapeutic effects and empower people to cope with their personal crises. However, under this interpretation, the ultimate goal of philosophical counseling is fostering wisdom, while the therapeutic effects are only bonuses ([Lahav 2001](#)).

In Chinese philosophy, Taoism is significantly characterized by its wisdom-orientation, especially its focus on wisdom in dealing with one's relationship with heaven, with things, with other people, and with oneself. The spirit of Taoist life wisdom is higher than that of Confucianism and deeper than that of Mohism because it can provide solid ontological support for the handling of interpersonal relationships (Liu and Zhang 2014). The basic spirit of naturalism runs through the unfolding of the concept of life from the beginning to the end, and the first basic view of Taoist wisdom of life is to follow nature and return to the basics. In the eyes of Lao Tzu, "man patterns himself on the operation of the earth; the earth patterns itself on the operation of heaven; heaven patterns itself on the operation of Dao; Dao patterns itself on what is natural 人法地, 地法天, 天法道, 道法自然" (Lao Tzu, chp. 25). Taoism believes that all things can develop naturally under the fundamental principle of the existence of all things, i.e., Dao, and "Dao always makes all things possible through non-interference with them 道常無為, 而無不為" (Lao Tzu, chp. 37). In Taoism, "Non-Action 無為" does not mean doing nothing but means not interfering unnecessarily with the natural development of things, which is actually a wiser way of getting things done efficiently.

Notably, wisdom as a process is encountered remarkably in Eastern philosophy (e.g., the wheel of wisdom in Indian philosophy), while wisdom as a product is a usual interpretation in Western philosophy. Gerald Rochelle, on the other hand, argues that wisdom is present in every human being but each person realizes it to a different degree during his or her lifetime; thus, wisdom is a process rather than a product, and it is a transaction rather than an acquisition (Rochelle 2008). The realization of wisdom depends on one's daily lives, on others, on the world, and on any other things that make up one's worldviews. In the pursuit of wisdom, we should be concerned with the process that leads us towards wisdom, not just with obtaining wisdom and knowing its particular nature.

The realization of wisdom is also a Sisyphean never-ending task, and what the task itself may bring us is not what we should focus on; it is our active engagement with the world during fulfilling this task that is more important to us. The pursuit of wisdom is a process that allows people to let go of the stereotypes and dogmas that have become obstacles in their lives so that they can become more in tune with the world. That is to say, the openness of mind is essential to the pursuit of wisdom, and the state of mind-openness is about being ready for change. We must be open to creative novelties, ready to respond to them freely and meaningfully, without which we can get nowhere. Through the practice of wisdom in philosophical practice, we will learn how to make good judgments and what it really means for us to lead a good, meaningful life.

### 3.2.3. Virtue-Orientation

Virtues play an important role in the process of pursuing truth and wisdom in Eastern and Western philosophy. Yu (2020) explores the concept of skill in Zhuangzi (Ji 技) and Stoicism (techne) and argues that for both Zhuangzi and the Stoics, by manifesting Dao 道 (or logos) and cultivating virtue, skillful activity can be taken as the spiritual exercise to nourish the art of living through the practice of professional skills, which makes life a good flow, i.e., spiritual satisfaction or happiness.

Following Hadot (1995), Grimm and Cohoe (2021) consider spiritual exercises an important part of the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life, which retains its usefulness in contemporary society as a way of anchoring value judgments in the soul and dispelling value illusions. Bendik-Keymer (2009) presents a sample spiritual exercise, a contemporary form of the written practice that ancient philosophers used to examine their consciences and shape their characters (Hadot 1995, 2002), concluding that through the form of questioning, which allows us to distinguish the point of reflection from effects of reflection and a manner of writing from a manner of reading, spiritual exercises aim to create a habit of thoughtfulness in the writer, and then by way of teaching, to suggest one to the reader. Such a habit is of great importance because virtue is a habit, and there can be no learning of virtue itself without habituation into it (Bendik-Keymer 2009).



According to Tukiainen (2010), a wise person must know many things: first and foremost, the goals and values of life, and when and how to satisfactorily achieve those important goals in life. In his view, to gain wisdom, one must know how to live well, and living well depends primarily on virtue; therefore, virtue is the essence of wisdom, and philosophical counseling is also a process of cultivating virtue. Virtue is related to self-understanding, and Tukiainen (2010) distinguishes between cognitive virtue and practical virtue, although the two are not completely distinct from each other. The cognitive virtues include self-knowledge, which is important for people to be aware of and pursue their goals and understand their emotions. One's knowledge of the external world can also be seen as a virtue that enables one to lead a satisfying and morally acceptable life. This knowledge is so important that we must rely on it if we want to be successful in our actions because when we make decisions, we must take into account the value, feasibility, and appropriateness of all possible actions; this ability of deliberation is subject to the knowledge of oneself and of the external world (Tukiainen 2010).

In Tukiainen's view, to remain open to new ways of knowing oneself and the world is a cognitive virtue because sometimes we need to adopt a new perspective that is completely different from what we had before; such a change may cause us to evaluate our situations quite differently, and our emotions and behaviors may be affected by it (Tukiainen 2010). The practical virtue with objectivity, on the other hand, means distancing oneself from immediate emotions, viewing them in relation to human life, and viewing them from the perspective of the surrounding environment and the wider world, thus avoiding making decisions that one would regret in the future in an overly egotistical and overly emotional situation (Šulavíková 2014).

Similarly, Amir (2006) sees the mission of philosophical counseling as having three components: first, it is to enhance the visitors' ability to think abstractly in different directions between the abstract and the concrete; second, it is to enhance the intellectual virtues of the visitors in order ultimately to deepen their intellectual courage and autonomy, because the nature of philosophy is embodied in intellectual virtues, and the visitors need to learn to accept different points of view and develop virtues such as impartiality, critical evaluation of different opinions, mental clarity and independence, and intellectual courage including perseverance and determination; finally, philosophical counseling fosters moral virtues in its visitors, with the ultimate goal of promoting and cultivating those thoughts and emotions that we must have in order to attain the wisdom that fosters and promotes inclusiveness and solidarity in dealing with others. Amir (2006) believes that an important goal of philosophical counseling is to strengthen the autonomy of the visitors, where autonomy means relying on the power of the individual to choose among different opinions and to form one's own. The concept of autonomy is closely associated with virtues such as courage and humility and highlights the connection between the cognitive process, which presupposes the existence of a mental capacity to judge whether someone can make a better judgment than we can, and the volitional process, which presupposes the existence of a capacity to control people's emotions, and it is just these emotions that prevent many useful skills from being applied efficiently in people's life (Amir 2006).

Notably, Fleming (2000) lists a series of virtues that he believes will be useful for both philosophical counselors and the visitors, such as courage, moral and psychological stability (or equilibrium), listening, patience, humility, timing, irony and humor (especially the ability to laugh at oneself, and not take oneself too seriously), and warmth and friendliness; in addition, there are other virtues that may be equally important, such as honesty, sincerity, empathy, non-judgmental acceptance, authenticity, epoche (i.e., suspension of judgement), moderation (sophrosyne), equanimity (ataraxia), confrontation (agon), self-confidence, creativity, spontaneity, and wisdom.

Although virtue is insufficient for the achievement of happiness, it enhances the likelihood of an acceptable or even satisfying life. Philosophical practice is essential to highlight the role of virtue in leading people to a philosophical way of life. Although philosophical practitioners should do their best to take an unbiased and value-neutral

position, they should also be capable of counseling the visitors from a “wise” point of view for their information and also be aware of the virtues that the visitors should be encouraged to pursue and explore. If the visitors wish to use these virtues to help them gain inner peace, they should then place higher weights on these virtues.

In short, virtues enable people to better deal with the present and future crises in their lives. Although the value-neutral philosophical practitioners usually do not compel the visitors to act in accordance with moral norms as the moral preachers normally do, the process of philosophical practice is likely to lead to a deep understanding of virtue, a strong desire for it, and ultimately its practice, which makes philosophical practice a promising way of moral education. As the philosophical practitioners guide the visitors to reveal and justify their doxastic presuppositions, the visitors may discover the hidden contradictions or conflicts in their belief systems. In this way, a rational person should understand that the concerned contradictions or conflicts should be eliminated by revising some of their beliefs or behaviors accordingly.

#### 4. Discussion

We thus interpreted philosophical practice as a kind of spiritual exercise that aims at truth, wisdom, and virtue. Since the first institution of philosophical practice was founded in Germany in 1981, philosophical practice in the contemporary sense has already become a new frontier in philosophical research, which is manifested by the emergence of recognized philosophical practitioners, representative philosophical practice theories and methods, specialized philosophical practice academic organizations, journals, conferences, college education, and professional training (Harteloh 2013b). On the theoretical side, philosophical practice research generally contains six aspects: first, the historical intellectual resources of philosophical practice, such as the practical wisdom in Eastern and Western philosophy; second, the definition of concepts related to philosophical practice, such as philosophical counseling, philosophical therapy, academic philosophy, and philosophical pedagogy; third, the goals and roles of philosophical practice; fourth, the relationship between philosophical practice and other helping disciplines or professions such as psychological counseling and therapy; fifth, different methods and modes of philosophical practice (see Table 1); sixth, the entry requirements, training methods, curriculum planning, and value norms and ethical codes for the philosophical practitioners.

While considering philosophical practice as spiritual exercises, Hadot (1995, 2002) generally mentions four kinds of exercises: reading, writing, and learning to live and die. It is noteworthy that, on the one hand, reading refers not only to the act of reading texts but also to reading life as such, and the reading of texts is an exercise for reading life; on the other hand, writing refers not only to the writing of essays but also to writing the story of one’s own life. Cooper (2007, 2012) seems to miss this metaphorical point. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that Cooper’s criticism against Hadot actually has its points, and to avoid the possible confusion and controversy, we need to identify philosophical practice as spiritual exercises in the broad sense and also in the narrow sense and to distinguish a “philosophical” way of life from a life guided by religion, tradition, or some other source alone (Grimm and Cohoe 2021). Nevertheless, a philosophical way of life can merge with a life according to religion and tradition. For instance, it is proposed by Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam that the true Christian lives according to the example of Jesus Christ through reading the story of the Christ in the holy scriptures (Erasmus 2019), which is different from the religious life that is full of practices, ceremonies, traditions, and conceptions, from which the “Spirit” seems to have departed (Huizinga [1924] 1957). Consequently, we further described three characteristics of philosophical practice (i.e., truth-orientation, wisdom-orientation, and virtue-orientation) that would guarantee the philosophical nature of the spiritual exercises therein. We also want to remind the readers that we never claim that a philosophical practice has to possess all three characteristics simultaneously, but generally, in order to maintain the philosophical spirit of the practices, they should be directed to either truth, wisdom, or virtue.

It needs to be clarified that when identifying philosophical practice as spiritual exercises in the narrow sense, we are actually defining philosophy as a career pursuing truth, wisdom, and virtue. To this extent, all philosophical practices are, in essence, spiritual exercises in that they possess at least one of the three characteristics. But this position may be challenged because people could have different ideas about what philosophical practice is and, more controversially, about what philosophy is. Etymologically speaking, “philosophy” comes from the Greek word “philosophia”, which means “love of wisdom”. Therefore, the wisdom-orientation of philosophy is generally acceptable for most philosophers (Cooper 2012; Hadot 1995). However, when speaking of truth and virtue, the situation is more complicated. Some philosophy is generally not truth-oriented (e.g., Confucianism and Taoism) or virtue-oriented (e.g., phenomenology and analytic philosophy). Therefore, when we identify philosophical practice as spiritual exercises in the narrow sense, we are also interpreting philosophy and philosophical practice in the broad sense, while there of course can be different interpretations of philosophy and philosophical practice. In the meantime, according to our interpretation of philosophy and philosophical practice, a spiritual exercise can be regarded as philosophical practice only if at least one of the three characteristics is satisfied; otherwise, there will be no philosophical elements in this exercise, and it may even go to the opposite of philosophy.

It should also be emphasized that when speaking of the truth, wisdom and virtue orientations of spiritual exercises in philosophical practice, we need to understand these theoretical terms in the context of philosophical practice, that is to say, how they are developed in real life. For example, the correspondence theory of truth states that the truth or falsity of a sentence or proposition is determined only by how it correlates to worldly elements (e.g., facts, states of affairs, conditions, events, objects, properties) and those worldly elements must be related in the way the sentence or proposition represents them as being related (Mcgrath 2004). Rather, truth in philosophical practice means living according to one’s (personal) principles, emphasizing the consistency between one’s words (thoughts, theories, attitudes, etc.) and deeds. Thus, philosophical practitioners should do what they say and say what they do, which is a tension frequently discussed in philosophical counseling. Philosophical practice can also contribute to the enhancement of one’s wisdom and virtue in a similar way: through practicing and testing one’s theories and thoughts in life, and at the same time by forming or revising one’s theories and thoughts according to the observation and practice results in life, philosophical practice can help to deepen one’s understanding and application of wisdom and virtue in a remarkable way.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that, in the opinion of Quine (1981), revelatory and didactic writing, while appreciated, should be found in fiction, poetry, sermons, or literature; professional philosophers are not particularly well-positioned to help stabilize society, although we (as philosophers) should do what we can, and the only thing that can meet these continuing pressing needs may be wisdom: sophia can, but philosophy (philosophia) does not. In other words, Quine argues that philosophy does not necessarily have a unique role to play in improving social situations and solving social issues, but wisdom does have its role to play here. Quine is referring to social issues, but his conclusion seems to apply to personal issues as well. Philosophy and wisdom have crucial differences, and a philosopher who has a lot of philosophical knowledge does not necessarily have the corresponding degree of wisdom. Knowledge can be taught, but wisdom cannot. It is for this reason that we criticize the phenomenon that some philosophical practitioners intend to dogmatically use philosophical doctrines to deal with the visitors’ issues. Instead, we advocate the pursuit and enlightenment of wisdom and insights. As Confucius has said in the chapter “Zihan” of *The Analects* 論語·子罕, “The wise are free from perplexities 知者不惑”. Therefore, in Confucius’s view, a mature and wise person will not be wavering in his mind or be confused by external things (Ding et al. 2019). If the visitors’ wisdom is enhanced, they will certainly be able to respond more thoughtfully and insightfully to the issues that may occur in their future life.

However, it is unrealistic to expect that a philosophical counselor can mold a visitor into a virtuous person through just a few dialogues. The development of virtues depends both on the guidance of the philosophical counselor and also on the openness of the visitor's mind and his or her practice of the relevant virtues in real life because, during philosophical counseling, the visitors can usually acquire just a partial understanding of the virtues. However, it is another matter whether they can act in accordance with the standards and requirements of the virtues in their real life. Nevertheless, when the dialogue between the philosophical counselor and the visitor focuses on universal virtues, the specific issues that the visitor encounters in real life become less salient and disturbing in the moment. By shifting the subject of the dialogue from the specific issue the visitor is facing to the broad topic of "virtue", philosophical counseling enables the visitor to see the specific personal issue he or she wants to deal with from a new and higher level of perspective.

As to philosophical practice in the history of Chinese philosophy, it is important to note that, according to Wang Yangming 王陽明, a great Confucianist in the Ming dynasty of ancient China, "There is no one who knows the truth but does not act on it. If you know the truth but do not practice it in your daily life, then this is equal to saying that you do not know it at all" (Wang 1992). That is to say, a person is only considered to have understood the meaning and implications of a virtue if he or she is actually practicing it in action. Wang Yangming's above-mentioned principle of the "unity of knowledge and action 知行合一", which shares the spirit of Hadot's conception of "philosophy as a way of life", is deeply rooted in the history of Chinese philosophy, with Chuang Tzu as one of the most influential representatives. On the one hand, Chuang Tzu refused to be the Prime Minister of the state of Chu 楚 so as to practice his creed of life and pursue spiritual freedom (*Chuang Tzu*, Outer Chapters: Autumn Floods 莊子·外篇·秋水); on the other hand, Chuang Tzu was seen sitting on the ground and singing a song while rhythmically tapping the tiled basin when his wife died, regarding the circle of life and death as the same as the natural operation of four seasons (*Chuang Tzu*, Outer Chapters: Perfect Happiness 莊子·外篇·至樂). Chuang Tzu's open-minded attitude towards fame and death is obviously an excellent example of showing how wisdom can contribute to our "perfect happiness" in life (Liu and Zhang 2014).

Just as Bendik-Keymer (2009) has argued, virtue is a habit, and there can be no learning of virtue itself without habituation into it. Many people may be able to recognize the goodness of a virtue, but one cannot truly comprehend a virtue without one's own relevant practice experiences or making this virtuous behavior a habit. The philosophical counselors are not lobbyists who stand on the moral high ground; their roles are simply to help the visitors sort out and examine their beliefs and attitudes. The philosophical counselors may also not have an exact answer to the question "What is virtue?", but they can help the visitors explore virtue through a series of questions in their dialogues. By questioning and interrogating the visitors' beliefs and attitudes, the philosophical counselors challenge and possibly revise the visitors' views of virtue. In this way, visitors will be able to benefit from this virtue and see the stresses, conflicts, and failures they encounter in their life courses as opportunities to develop, test, and exercise their moral characters, and thus they will be more likely to acquire and realize the virtue through philosophical counseling ultimately.

With regard to the possible application fields of philosophical practice, as far as we can see, firstly, philosophical practice could be a professional technique to help the visitors tide over the most difficult phases in their life, obtaining the wisdom and courage to move forward, e.g., in the post-COVID-19 era (Damianos and Damianou 2020; Feary 2014, 2020; Lindseth 2012; Munroe 2020; Repetti 2020). Although many philosophers have started their careers as counselors, of course within the legal and appropriate scope of practice, only a few of them truly hold philosophical practice as a full-time job. With more people knowing and recognizing the usefulness of philosophical practice, we are looking forward to seeing more and more full-time philosophical practitioners who can earn a living by providing people with the needed service.

Secondly, philosophical practice could be utilized as an instrument to coordinate interpersonal, interorganizational, and even international relations. There are cognitive or affective conflicts among different people or different groups now and then. Traditional philosophy has already discussed a lot on dealing with these sorts of relations and conflicts, and the contemporary philosophical practice can contribute to advance further the relevant theories and practices (Haṭegan 2019, 2021). Lou Marinoff is an important pioneer in this aspect (Ikeda and Marinoff 2012; Marinoff 2017b), who excavates the cavernous philosophical foundations of war and peace (Marinoff 2019), and applies the virtue ethics of Aristotle, Buddha, and Confucius to harmonize extremes that are tearing humanity apart: political, religious, economic, educational, social, and sexual (Marinoff 2020).

Finally, philosophical practice could be used as an effective means of training and enhancing people's philosophical thinking. In the 21st century, if you want to get involved with the world and not be sifted out by the times and society, you have to harbor the ability of philosophizing, e.g., deepening, conceptualizing, problematizing, and questioning (Brenifier 2020). It is noteworthy that Brenifier now calls problematizing as criticizing, which is more neutral to the visitors' theme and not necessarily labeling it as a problem. Furthermore, although it is not necessary or possible to turn everyone into a philosopher, philosophical practice is undoubtedly beneficial to children's moral and intellectual development and also to people's self-awareness, self-regulation, self-fulfillment, self-transcendence, and interpersonal relationships in general (Cohen 2013; Ding 2016; Lahav 2006).

## 5. Conclusions

Through manifesting that philosophical practice has already become a new frontier in philosophical research and a new profession in society, we have highlighted that philosophical practice as spiritual exercises in the broad sense is not limited to religion and tradition. In contrast, philosophical practice as spiritual exercises in the narrow sense is still constrained to the exercises of reason and logos, which distinguishes it from particular spiritual exercises that are common in religion, although certain kinds of religious exercises such as Zen arts and mindfulness meditation could constitute an important part of philosophical practice. After defending Pierre Hadot's conceptions of spiritual exercises and philosophy as a way of life, we further propose that in the light of the distinct plurality of the methods and modes of philosophical practice and the spiritual exercises involved, and through maintaining the dynamic relationship between one's words (thoughts, theories, attitudes, etc.) and deeds, philosophical practice can be considered as a meaningful and applicable approach to pursuing truth, wisdom, and virtue.

We also discuss the promising future and possible application fields of philosophical practice. Overall, although philosophers may focus on the theoretical or practical aspects of philosophy differently, all of them can contribute to and benefit a lot from philosophical practice. Just as Socrates has proverbially claimed, the unexamined life is not worth living. Philosophical practitioners help people examine their beliefs, guiding them out of Plato's cave and leading them to reliable ways to happiness. With such exciting and appealing prospects, philosophical practice could hopefully grow into a daily necessity in people's lives.

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