

Inbar Graiver, *Asceticism of the Mind: Forms of Attention and Self-Transformation in Late Antique Monasticism* (Studies and Texts, 113), Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2018, pp. x, 237.

In a relatively wide range of literature comparing Christian monastic asceticism with some concepts of modern psychology, psychotherapy, and psychiatry, the works by Inbar Graiver have attracted attention by her singular voice already in 2016 and 2017, when her first papers on the topic have been published.¹ Before Graiver, it was normal to write on patristic ascetic theories, on the one hand, and psychological/psychiatric theories, on the other, without sufficient (for a scholarly publication) knowledge of either one (or, more often, of both). Indeed, we have had a good systematic exposition of ascetic doctrines from Jean-Claude Larchet,² but his own psychological and medical accompanying study has been written from the viewpoint of “antipsychiatry”, and using *Le Monde* as the main source of scholarly opinions in psychiatry.³ For Graiver, the inspiring example was that of Youval Rotman, her advisor for the dissertation on which her book is based (p. vii), even though Graiver’s own approach to both mediaeval primary sources and modern theories is different.⁴

Graiver seems to be the first among the modern scholars who became able to describe “from outside”, but still correctly, the monastic “science/art” (τέχνη, Church Slavonic *художество*, the same Slavonicism but no proper modern word in Russian) of the so-called *sobriety* (νήψις, Church Slavonic and Russian *трезвение*), that is, the control of the so-called *thoughts* (λογισμοί, Slavonic and Russian *помыслы*).⁵ To make this notion more perceptible to the modern

1 I. Graiver, “The Paradoxical Effects of Attentiveness,” *J ECS*, 24 (2016), pp. 199–227, and especially *eadem*, “‘I think’ vs. ‘The Thought Tells Me’: What Grammar Teaches Us about the Monastic Self,” *J ECS*, 25 (2017), pp. 255–279.

2 J.-Cl. Larchet, *Thérapeutique des maladies spirituelles* (Théologies), Paris, 1997.

3 J.-Cl. Larchet, *Thérapeutique des maladies mentales* (Théologies), Paris, 1992 (many reprints and translations).

4 Cf. Y. Rotman, *Insanity and Sanctity in Byzantium: The Ambiguity of Religious Experience*. Cambridge, MA, 2016, and my review in *The Journal of Religion*, 98 (2018), pp. 296–298.

5 When Graiver explains monastic doctrines, I can admire her concise style and, to use the word especially meaningful in the present context, sobriety. My remaining small quibbles belong to her choice of editions for quoting: not always the modern critical editions of the texts available in Greek (e.g., Macarius the Great, p. 49, fn. 92) and, which is the “worst” transgression of the modern rules, quoting Evagrius’s *Capita gnostica* according to Frankenberg’s 1912 Greek retroversion of the Syriac recension S_1 that is considered by the most of the scholars to be later and edited (p. 42, fn. 56; p. 44, fn. 63; with an incorrect bibliographical description at p. 200, where the Guillaumont’s 1959 publication is referred to but the edition of both S_1 and S_2 recensions is ascribed to Frankenberg; in fact, S_2 was discovered by Guillaumont himself, and his edition is its *editio princeps*). One would suggest Ilaria Ramelli’s very helpful commented

scholarly audience, Graiver often uses the term “self-control.” So far, this “science” was never much valued outside of its direct ascetic purpose. In contrast with the waterfall of the studies of “ascetical body” that poured out in the early 1970s and still produces a roaring stream, Graiver, as she modestly formulates, tries to explore what “has not received its due attention”: “the system of purely mental *askesis* that enabled them [sc., the ascetics] to attain” their goal “to ensure that the body conforms to the rational faculty” (p. 22).

The description of this “system” occupies the largest part of the book’s length, because Graiver addresses an audience not necessarily familiar with the ascetic doctrines. Such an accessible and succinct but adequate introduction is an important achievement by itself. One can realise how difficult would have been to draw this sketch exactly falling along the lines of force. Nevertheless, the main purpose of the book goes beyond this. Graiver provides a modern psychological background for an interpretation of this ascetical “system”, namely, cognitive psychology. This decision looks unexpected (to those who has had no previous knowledge of articles by Graiver herself), even if we agree that the modern cognitive science justifies Graiver’s “methodological assumption”: “the minds of modern and ancient humans are sufficiently similar in general cognitive function to warrant a meaningful comparison in some cases” (p. 25). This truth is, of course, indisputable for those who continue to use on a daily basis the practices described by Graiver, as the modern Eastern monks continue to do. However, can there any good thing come out of such a “positivist” experimental science as cognitive psychology? To my great surprise, Graiver proved that yes it can.

Graiver’s fundamental stance is the difference between the monastic understanding of “self”, on the one hand, and both modern understanding(s) and mediaeval common sense understanding, on the other. The true problem is not a “competition” between the body and the soul, but different subjectivities within the soul itself (cf. p. 70). These two attitudes are different in perception of self: “an insecure and loosely bounded self” having “the fuzzy boundary between the self and the world” of those who, like young John Cassian and his friend Germanos (in this respect, very similar to the ordinary modern people), have questioned elder Serenus, and “a self whose boundaries are much more clearly demarcated and secure, impregnable to demonic manipulation” of the elder himself, who tried “to clarify and stabilize the boundaries of the monastic self by drawing a clear distinction between the soul and evil spirits” (pp.

translation: Evagrius, *Kephalaia Gnostika: A New Translation of the Unreformed Text from the Syriac*. Translated with an Introduction and Commentary by I. L. E. Ramelli. (Writings from the Greco-Roman World, 38), Atlanta, GA, 2015.

68-69). In this monastic psychology, there is a unique subject, the true self, that can either accept or reject the *thoughts*; however, these thoughts, especially the evil ones, are not produced by this self but have an external source. Not all “my” thoughts are truly mine: this is the point where the ascetic doctrine differs with both mediaeval common sense approach and the modern psychology. My own sin begins only at the stage when I start to accept an evil thought as my own. I have a liberty not to accept anything that appears within my mind. This is why, let us add, the highest ascetic virtue is *discernment* (διάκρισις).

One can wonder, at this point, how the demonic subjects of unwanted thoughts could be dealt with by modern psychology. Graiver found the field where the monastic discipline and cognitive psychology overlap, the studies of attentiveness and some other closely related matters, including the disorders produced by the misled attentiveness such as OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder).⁶ The *sobriety*, that is, the control of mind required by monastic practices implies if not the complete suppression, then at least a severe limitation of the wandering of mind, which appears to be at odds with what modern psychotherapy normally says.⁷ It says that it is normal not to be *sober* in this

6 Cf. esp. pp. 179-183, where Graiver discusses, within the context of neuroscience data, parallel modern therapeutic practices created with a reference to the Buddhist asceticism: the ancient meditative practices are proven able to create new neural circuits instead of unwanted ones. “Situating monastic demonology in the context of contemporary neuroscience enable us to recognize its powerful therapeutic potential” (p. 183). From a patristic perspective, it is hard not to notice that situating contemporary neuroscience in the context of monastic demonology would be even better: at least, it is monastic demonology and not contemporary neuroscience that provides an explanation of the very origin of some unwanted neural circuits.

7 This part of Graiver’s exposition slightly suffers from not discussing the four main stages of development of the sinful thought – from the simple appearance to a real sin committed. These stages are the following: (1) προσβολή (“attack”, Church Slavonic and Russian *привлечение*) when sin is not yet applicable, because it is considered to be outside the human responsibility, (2) συνδυασμός (“collusion”, Church Slavonic and Russian *сочетание*), where a sin becomes possible, whereas the strong ascetics became able to kill the thought at this stage (but, to the ordinary people including monks, it is recommended to reject the thought just after their appearance, without starting any interaction with them; for the experienced ascetics, however, συνδυασμός could be useful to explore the specific sources of their current temptations), (3) συγκατάθεσις (“approval, assent”, Church Slavonic and Russian *сочложение*, originally a term of Stoic psychology), which is already a sin, and (4) αἰχμαλωσία (“captivity”, Church Slavonic and Russian *плънение*), when the sin gets full power over the human. Thus, the advice of a therapist to an OCD patient concerning the compulsive thoughts quoted by Graiver (p. 118) “Let them simply float through your mind. Regard them as noise, just noise. Don’t try to fight them off, or block them, or cancel them” [S. Rachman, *The treatment of obsessions* (Cognitive behaviour therapy: science and practice series), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 96] does not contradict, *pace* Graiver, the monastic discipline of mind. It focuses on the first stage of the self-control, the rejec-

monastic sense of the word. Graiver very helpfully refers here to Daniel Wegner's "Ironie Process Theory" of mental control (pp. 117-119).⁸ Wenger's theory, based on experimental data, explains the mechanism responsible for the "ironic" effect: when one tries to concentrate oneself on something and avoid thinking about anything else, one becomes even more sensible to the distracting stimuli. Therefore, Wenger advised, in one of his earlier studies (1989, co-authored with D. Schneider), those who wish to suppress unwanted thoughts: "Our simplest advice would be to avoid suppression, to stop stopping" (pp. 117-118). This goes in contrast with the requirements of monastic discipline⁹ but, indeed, provides a strikingly plausible explanation of mental difficulties, sometimes mental disorders, experienced by those who practice such discipline. However, Wenger and, after him, Graiver assert that "attention is trainable"; therefore, "...people who regularly practise thought suppression may develop skilled and automatic intentional processes of attention, thereby becoming capable of effective suppression. Such exceptional skills can be developed by turning mental control activities into well-learned habits through repeated practice" (p. 118).¹⁰ This is an adequate explanation of both possible success of monastic self-control and its risks.

The most recent studies of mind wandering under different mental disorders suggest, in my opinion, extremely important perspectives for the comparative studies in modern psychotherapy theories and the monastic self-control and even, on a broader scale, monastic theory of passions. These

tion of the προσβολαί. At this stage, it is vital to discern between one's own self and the atmosphere around which is teeming with bad *thoughts*. Cf. apophthegm *Poimen* 28: some brother said to Abba Poimen that he has an enormous quantity of thoughts (πολλοὺς λογισμοὺς ἔχω); the elder led him outside the cell and asked to spread out his clothes and hold the wind ("Ἀπλωσον τὸν κόλπον σου, καὶ κράτισον τοὺς ἀνέμους). The brother said that he can not. The elder answered: "If you can not do this, then you could not forbid the thoughts to enter. But you have to stand against them (Εἰ τοῦτο οὐ δύνασαι ποιῆσαι, οὐδὲ τοὺς λογισμοὺς δύνασαι κωλύσαι ἐλθεῖν· ἀλλὰ σὸν ἐστι τὸ ἀντιστήναι αὐτοῖς)" (PG 65, 329 A). Most of these *thoughts* do not require any specific struggle, but one has to ignore them. Severe symptoms of OCD, however, make monastic practices of self-control impossible, which, if applied without discretion, could bring serious damage to the persons with mental problems including OCD.

- 8 Wegner started to publish the relevant experimental studies since 1987; see esp.: D. M. Wegner, "Ironie Process of Mental Control," *Psychological Review*, 101 (1994), pp. 34-52, and *idem*, "Why the mind wanders," in: *Scientific approaches to consciousness*, J.D. Cohen and J. W. Schooler, eds. Mahwah, NJ, 1997, pp. 295-315. Cf. D. M. Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, Cambridge, MA, – London, 2002.
- 9 However, for not exaggerating this contrast, we have to keep in mind the apophthegm *Poimen* 28 quoted above.
- 10 Paraphrasing Wegner, "Ironie Process," p. 49 (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 48-49).

studies include other than OCD disorders, especially ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder),¹¹ BPD (borderline personality disorder),¹² NPD (narcissistic personality disorder),¹³ and depression.¹⁴ All these disorders are quite widespread in monastic milieux – much more than often recalled psychoses – and could not be avoided in both historical and actual studies of monastic psychology.

It is clear from the above that I consider this Graiver's book to be a great success. Probably, the key of this success is her most general appreciation:

Asceticism in the Eastern monastic tradition assumes that humans are free to transform and improve themselves by ascetic practice, and with divine aid can even cultivate extraordinary powers and a new form of existence. Hence, although asceticism might appear to be a pessimistic movement of "retreat into an inner citadel" [phrase by Isaiah Berlin from his famous essay *Two Concepts of Liberty*, 1958], there is powerful optimism at its heart (p. 189).

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- 11 P. Seli et al., "On the relation of mind wandering and ADHD symptomatology," *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 22 (2015), pp. 629-636; M. S. Franklin et al., "Tracking Distraction: The Relationship Between Mind-Wandering, Meta-Awareness, and ADHD Symptomatology," *Journal of Attention Disorders*, August 2014, DOI: 10.1177/1087054714543494.
- 12 P. Kanske et al., "The wandering mind in borderline personality disorder: Instability in self- and other-related thoughts," *Psychiatry Research*, 242 (2016), pp. 302-310.
- 13 P. Kanske et al., "Where the Narcissistic Mind Wanders: Increased Self-Related Thoughts Are More Positive and Future Oriented," *Journal of Personality Disorders*, 31 (2017), pp. 553-566.
- 14 F. Hoffmann et al., "Where the depressed mind wanders: Self-generated thought patterns as assessed through experience sampling as a state marker of depression," *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 198 (2016), pp. 127-134.