# Chapter 1: What is the “Spiritual?”

“Thus the human being can never be *holy*, *but of course* [one can be] *virtuous*. For virtue consists precisely in *self-overcoming*.”

—Kant, Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion[[1]](#footnote-1)

## I. “Spirituality” vs. “Spiritualism.”

**i.** In the introduction to his quasi-memoire *La puissance et la sagesse*, the French sociologist of labor and technology Georges Friedmann situates the collected reflections, field notes and journal entries that constitute what he calls the “autobiography that I will never write,”[[2]](#footnote-2) as follows:

But gradually, as this work advanced, these events, these collective and personal experiences, necessitated a series of disruptive reassessments on my part, which profoundly changed my plan. In 1945, straining toward a humanism capable of ‘*genuinely* transforming the human condition,’ I had not forgotten the moral conditions upon which its realization depended, although I had indeed placed them in the third row, after economic and social conditions. Today, without denying the role of these latter—far from it, one will note—the observation of our world led me to affirm the essential role of these moral conditions. After having, during my period of ‘naïve Marxism,’ given a quasi-exclusive privilege to the ‘material’ dimensions of things, I began to perceive with greater and greater clarity the *spiritual* dimension, which is so despised today [*actuellement si méprisé*]; and yet, with out it, there will never be a socialism with a human face. [[3]](#footnote-3)

This work of reimagining the place of what Friedmann calls here the “spiritual” in general, and its relationship to the political in particular, emerge from a life and career dedicated to the investigation of human labor, our relationship to machines, the experience of war,[[4]](#footnote-4) and the question of revolution. That its importance for him is tied directly, indeed necessarily, to that life and that work, cannot be overemphasized.

And yet, despite their deep significance, it is by no means clear, certainly not at this juncture, just what Friedmann means when he speaks of the “moral” and “spiritual” conditions that he is compelled to re-situate, both in general and within political life in particular. What can it possibly mean to speak of an ethics or a morality that we place neither in front of nor behind, but rather directly alongside the political—let alone one that not only deserves, but on a certain understanding *demands* the appellation “spiritual?” That this and other terms are not exactly clear for him either, and that at least one goal of the nearly 500-pages of reflection and meditation that make up *La puissance* is to achieve some clarity on the very terms that he invokes at the outset, is of course no coincidence. Indeed, and as we will see, the importance of what may now seem a subtle distinction—between a text like *La puissance* as a series of reflective, confessional meditations on certain concepts, a more standard philosophical explication of those concepts—cannot be overemphasized.

But Friedmann is by no means the only thinker in recent memory to invoke this kind of language, and the questions that stem from its use in this way proliferate rapidly. Pierre Hadot, following Friedmann, and Michel Foucault, following Hadot, also took up these questions, and did so with many of the same concerns, and indeed reservations. And so, if we are to understand exactly what Friedmann means when he uses the language of “spirituality,” it is worth beginning with the simple observation that he and others do so in spite of both the negative connotations it tends to carry with it, and the ambiguity that surrounds it.

Regarding the former, Friedmann’s characterization of the “spiritual dimension” as *“si méprisé,”* remains as accurate in the United States today as it was in France in 1970, certainly for the kind of politicized, academic audience that we doubtless continue to share. It is—in part—for similar reasons that Friedmann explicitly voices his concern to distance his own work from what he calls “spiritualism” in an endnote[[5]](#footnote-5) to the above-cited text, all while insisting that no other term will do:

This term, ‘spiritual,’ will surprise, and perhaps even shock, certain readers. I was myself somewhat disturbed by its resonances, its association with ‘spiritualist’ doctrines or dogmas, which are so foreign to me.” But no other [term] could generally indicate the *potential* of the forces of intelligence and love which are available to human beings, however unfairly we are treated by fate, and which are at the root of, and are also commensurate with, human freedom.

These forces, for the most diverse reasons, may remain potential or inactive, or may deploy themselves actively; in that case, I have often characterized them as “moral” forces. I have on occasion, however, used these adjectives interchangeably.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Similarly, in the representative piece “Spiritual Exercises,” Pierre Hadot, citing Friedmann with specific reference to the eponymous technical term, echoes this distancing almost verbatim: “The expression is a bit disconcerting for the contemporary reader. In the first place, it is no longer quite fashionable these days to use the term ‘spiritual.’”[[7]](#footnote-7) But Hadot continues, again echoing Friedmann quite clearly: “It is nevertheless necessary to use this term, I believe, because none of the other adjectives we could use—‘psychic,’ ‘moral,’ ‘ethical,’ ‘intellectual, ‘of thought,’ ‘of the soul’—covers all aspects of the reality we want to describe.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

The “reality” that Hadot refers to here centrally concerns itself with a what he, following Friedmann, calls “spiritual exercises,” Michel Foucault’s ethics of the “care of the self,” what the Czech phenomenologist Jan Patocka’s refers to as the “care of the soul,” what Martin Luther King Jr. famously termed “self-purification” in the Birmingham *Letter*, and what, for the purposes of this work, I will generally refer to as the *category of practices of self-overcoming*. I use the term “category” at this early stage, rather than more simply referring to a singular “concept,” because while it is clear that this group of notions can be taken as a kind of conceptual cluster, it is equally clear that the development of each is marked by very precise forms of specification. While, as we will see, they all share a concern with forms of *exercise* meant to bring about some kind of ethical[[9]](#footnote-9) transformation within practicing subject(s), each of the differing conceptions and formulations that we will encounter here are uniquely tied to an entire range of motivations, attending philosophical and historical concepts, questions and concerns. But if the disclaimers of Hadot and Friedmann are at all indicative, one of the first things that the members of this category do share is the concern voiced by those disclaimers, a concern to assiduously avoid any conflation of such practices and their attending discourses with what Friedmann refers to above as suspect forms of “spiritualism.”

**ii.** The forms of “contempt” and disconcertion in question for Hadot and Friedmann above certainly stem in no small part from the strong association of both the term “spiritual” and the notion of “spirituality” with seemingly unsophisticated and capricious forms of “vulgar religiosity” or “pop-spirituality,” ranging from late 19th and early 20th century forms of spiritualism-proper and theosophy, to contemporary New Age practices, “self-help” manuals, and so much else besides. In contemporary American culture (at least), such forms of religious life and their attending discourses are often associated with claims of the sort that one is “spiritual but not religious,”[[10]](#footnote-10) and are taken to be affectively mawkish and doctrinally without substance. As the American sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow so concisely puts it, “Some observers…wonder whether ‘spiritual’ has become synonymous with ‘flaky.’”[[11]](#footnote-11)

But my goal here is not a defense of those maligned forms of popular religious life, to whatever extent such a defense is or is not called for. Wuthnow and others have so ably taken up the task of contextualizing and complicating our understanding of these kinds of “spiritualist” traditions, contemporary or otherwise. Rather, and again, I want to begin the larger series of reflections and investigations that will ultimately constitute the present work by very simply noting that Friedmann and others are very much aware of the kinds of associations the concepts in question carry with them—and indeed share a *certain* antipathy toward them—and yet insist on retaining a qualified and perhaps more precisely rendered technical vision of terms like “spiritual,” “spirituality,” and “soul” nonetheless. If Michel Foucault is at pains to distance his “ethical” work from the “Californian cult of the self;”[[12]](#footnote-12) what both he and Pierre Hadot call a kind of “moral dandyism;”[[13]](#footnote-13) and all of these thinkers from, say, the crystal-healing and statements of the form that one is “into yoga and very spiritual” which populate Wuthnow’s investigations;[[14]](#footnote-14) then what must they mean when they invoke this kind of language?

The problem is in fact already evinced by the way that I have phrased the question, as we must avoid confusing the specific philosophical, ethical and political questions that Foucault and Hadot are trying to raise on the one hand, for the kinds of popular concerns and associations that attach so immediately to a term like “spirituality” on the other. We need to be just as clear and precise about what these thinkers are *rejecting,* and *why,* as we do about what it is that they are endorsing. Thus we are compelled to emphasize that whatever spirituality is, there are certain criteria that constitute the category of what Friedmann calls spiritualism that are determinative of what it *is not*. But it should be equally clear that it is not simply a matter of clarifying what someone like Friedmann *does* mean by distinguishing it from what he does *not* mean, and then dispensing with the latter. Rather, here the problem of spiritualism is dialectally related to spirituality: to understand the beliefs, practices and general forms that the writers in question want to include *also* allows us to see why those areas that they wish to exclude cannot simply be dismissed or declared irrelevant. Rather, what seem like disclaimers in fact begin to reveal why—and *how*—certain aspects of what we are calling spiritualism do indeed represent real problems and genuine challenges to what it is that much of the present work will concern itself to articulate.

In order to gain that purchase, however, we need to begin by untangling a knot in two-parts. The consistent first hurdle is the thus conflation of the spiritual in general with what are taken to be the more undesirable *trappings* of spiritualism, which so often hijack and re-direct the kinds of questions that Friedmann, Hadot, Foucault and I want to raise, and thus prevent any such conversation from simply getting off the ground. In other words, the most immediate, say, “aesthetic” rejections of the beliefs and practices that Wuthnow investigates are indeed un-rigorous; to reject a set of beliefs because they “seem flaky” is completely superficial. But even recognizing this fact raises a second, and more important hurdle. That is, the conflation of *a rejection of those trappings with a series of much more fundamental philosophical and ethical concerns*. If we think that Friedmann dismisses spiritualism for superficial reasons, then we throw the baby out with the bathwater, and obscure our ability to see the truly substantive issues that motivate him. In other words, we need to be *what it is important here to identify and reject*, and *what is simply a distraction.* To assume that *any* strong response to spiritualist forms is merely superficial, and thus unfair, is to already begin to miss the more fundamental critique *and* *therefore* the line of thinking that will ultimately lead to *the positive* specification of the criteria of spirituality.

Regarding our first hurdle, two very general examples will lend some clarity, and allow us to move to the second:

 1) First, the term “spiritual” itself tends to most immediately suggest a category marked by certain metaphysical concerns—in the popular sense of that term—including, perhaps above all, belief in varying forms of interaction with objects taken to exist “beyond nature.” Wuthnow’s text provides ample ethnographic and historical proof of this general association, by both adherents and detractors alike. However, it is clear by even a cursory glance at the philosophical texts in question that when Friedmann or Foucault use the term “spiritual,” they certainly do not mean it in the sense of “having to do with spirits.” *That* this is the case for those writers is so uncontroversial as to merit only a passing statement.

The problem is more complex, however: On my reading of Friedmann, Hadot and perhaps above all Foucault, the distinction between spirituality and spiritualism is made *not* for the sole or primary purpose of excluding given forms of practice based on either affective trappings or metaphysical commitments. The important point is not that these criteria exclude a given example from the domain of spirituality, but rather that *they are completely irrelevant to the definition of that category itself.* Put differently: the adjudication of the truth-content of metaphysical statements about the existence of such objects or beings, as we would find in the traditional philosophy of religion, is so far from the concerns to be raised here, that, I will insist, this distance can only be charted *en passant* over the course of this project.

That Wuthnow’s subjects, for example, believe in ghosts, angels and the like, may indeed be a source of discomfort for someone like Friedmann—and, to be as forthcoming as possible, myself—surely cannot be denied. But if the “spiritual” here does not *necessarily* imply concerns with objects beyond nature that we associate with spiritualism, it will not *necessarily* exclude them either. If “metaphysical content” is in no way a definitional criterion of what we mean when we use the technical term “spiritual” here, it is an *equally irrelevant criterion of dismissal* from that category. For that reason, if the spiritual is not synonymous with spiritualism, there may indeed still be room for certain forms of the latter within the former as it will be reconstructed here. In a way that will perhaps appear more puzzling (to certain audiences at least) than an endorsement of either pole in this opposition, the metaphysical content of the category “spiritualism” is *completely irrelevant* to what I will argue is the far more robust notion of the *spiritual* as deployed and developed by such thinkers as those I have invoked.

 2) A second, and equally pressing problem with the kind of spiritualism to be distinguished from spirituality in the technical sense, is the possibility that a given set of beliefs and practices may ultimately be doctrinally incoherent. This is one possible reading, or even definition, of what Wuthnow means when he rehearses the concern that certain beliefs and practices are “flaky.” It cannot be denied that New Age thought and yoga-studio philosophy can appear this way: rather than a cohesive set of beliefs and practices, we often observe something akin to a shopping cart (to invoke the “marketplace” metaphor) full of spiritual odds and ends, chosen and brought together haphazardly for their affective purchase rather than any more robust criteria, pragmatic or otherwise.

The problem, of course, with this approach is that it lacks its own criteria for the assessment not simply of the coherence of such practices, but of a notion of “coherence” itself appropriate to the task. In fact, there may indeed be forms of spiritualism that do fit the criteria of spirituality, but *we do not yet have those criteria,* and thus cannot yet judge*.* This applies equally to both “metaphysical content” and “doctrinal incoherence.” Thus, any genuinely rigorous re-approach to such material, on my part at least, could *only* occur on the other side of the present work. In other words, there may well be a place for certain forms, or even simply aspects, of what we spiritualism within what these thinkers call spirituality, although, again, I take it that we currently lack the proper standards by which such a judgment can be made. And although this problem falls outside the bounds of this project, the production and specification of the very resources we would need to appraise, let alone judge, such traditions and practices, are themselves tasks necessary to our success here.

**iii.** All of this is to say that there are far more pressing matters than “spirits” and “flakiness” at issue. The disclaimers of Hadot and Friedmann should serve not simply to dismiss such trappings outright, but to draw our attention to the fact that whereas they seem quite important in the popular discourse around spirituality, they are actually irrelevant in terms of what we are ultimately after. But this distinction is also important because it allows us to see that while “spiritualism” has come to already serve as a kind of foil here, none of the claims I will make *necessarily* denigrate such forms of popular religious life, and it is my intention to neither attack nor defend them. The question remains of course, of just what it is that we are after; that is, what might lead a committed Marxist like Friedmann, or the philosopher of power *par excellence*, Michel Foucault, to the necessity of a conception of “spirituality” and practices of the self? And, moreover, what are the real, substantive challenges to those conceptions, beyond the mere affective discomfort that I have been describing?

Here the dialectic swings back in the other direction: we will need to get a broader view not only of how Friedmann, Hadot, Foucault and others have evoked not simply the term “spirituality,” but of the complex network of inter-related conceptions and texts that make up the category of practices of self-overcoming more generally. That is, we can only understand the *genuine* challenges that I have alluded to by now turning to the positive specification of the category itself, through a kind of “reconciliation” of various conceptions that fall within it. That work will in turn lead us to a more precise specification of at least two major problems, genuine and fundamental challenges to this category as a whole, which will themselves motivate the chapters that follow.

We will start then with Pierre Hadot, in no small part because Hadot himself begins with Friedmann.

## II. Pierre Hadot: Spiritual Exercises from Antiquity to the Present.

### i. Spiritual “Demands.”

**i. Spiritual Demands.** Pierre Hadot is

ii. Hadot’s Prescriptive Project

### ii. Hadot on Spiritual Exercises: An Overview

i. Differing forms

ii. Conversion & Self-transformation

 1) How

 2) Why

 a) What is this “self” that is changed?

### iii. The Problem of Specialists.

### iv. The Question of “Contemporary” Spiritual Exercises.

### v. Open Questions.

i. Hadot wants to make ancient Spiritual Exercises relevant for us.

## III. Jan Patočka: The Care of the Soul.

## IV. Georges Friedmann: From the Great Disequilibrium to the Interior Effort*.*

### i. An Unquiet Wisdom.

Friedmann, for his part, is far more explicit, and far more detailed, in describing the circumstances, experiences and conditions which would lead him to a concern with what he too calls spiritual exercises, or what is alternately referred to as “the interior effort.” The “spiritual needs” with which he is so centrally concerned are rooted in what he calls the “Great Disequilibrium”[[15]](#footnote-15) (*Le Grand Déséquilibre*), which in its turn emerges from “the technological adventure of man in the 20th century.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The latter is his name for a general set of themes and concerns that emerged forcefully for him not simply through study, but in and through his own intellectual, political, and personal experiences as a medic in the Second World War, and a career studying the relationships between human beings and machines in both the West and the former Soviet Union.

Through of a love for the rural world and forms of labor which characterized his childhood, “at sixteen,” he says, “I wanted to become a farmer,”[[17]](#footnote-17) but this was not to be. However, we can speculate that perhaps the course his life and work would take was also rooted in those same experiences, and shares something fundamental with those concerns:

I did not become a farmer. I chose instead (or did I choose?) to try and understand the technological adventure of human beings in the 20th Century. Over the course of 30 years, the lover of nature and solitude instead took halls populated by machines, construction sites, the docks, mineshafts, and thermal power stations for his field of study. I passed a large part of the years of my youth and maturity in fumes, dust, and dins; in the middle of the thronging crowds of the cities and suburbs of the East and West, in the industrial zones of the ‘Old,’ ‘New,’ and ‘Third’ worlds. What a path; how many thousands of kilometers I must have wandered for the sake of inquiries crude in comparison to the methods that researchers now have at their disposal![[18]](#footnote-18)

***[Is there a citation from the War Journal that would help make this point as well?]***

It is the realities of these experiences, these “physical” or “exterior” journeys which will lead him to first diagnose a series of problems unique to the technological adventure of the 20th century, and to later arrive (at very least) at a certain orientation toward addressing them. It is the substance of *La puissance* to chart this entire journey, with all its difficulties, errors, insights and flaws, in as direct and clear a way as can be rendered:

And so here is a book that in no way hides its values, unbiased [*wertfrei*]. It navigates a counter-current, at a time when certain forces, whose historical determinations are evident, give rise on all sides to formal research whose point of departure is a de-valorization of all “human” content. After many years and many voyages on several continents, I began to feel the need for an “interior voyage.” We will follow the steps of this development here, punctuated by the fragments of the autobiography I will never write. You will find here, communicated by a man who has sought to understand—and not to hide—his own weaknesses and failures, some responses called forth by the great questions that he has attempted to live. (Readers will judge for themselves the extent to which I have succeeded.)[[19]](#footnote-19)

A little further on, on the same page, he identifies his goal, or at least one of his primary goals, in these reflections as the articulation of something he refers to as our “humanization,” our “becoming human,” though in ways that are again particular to the troubles and promises of technological life. Of the book, he says,

Its title [*Wisdom and Power*] is likely to bring about a misunderstanding, but one which should dissipate with this preface. The wisdom which is so necessary today is not a form of contemplation, a retreat from the unrest and abominations of the century. Far from being “rationalistic,” in the restrictive sense of the term, I refer here to “reason” in the sense understood by Jaspers, which envelopes and includes a potential of intellect and love, everything in human beings that can aid us in *becoming human*, everything that can contribute to our *“humanization.”* It is an unquiet wisdom, one that is active and audacious, and which, in the eyes of some, appears more or less ridiculous, but so be it.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

### ii. The “Great Disequilibrium.”

The search for “humanization,” and of the “wisdom” required for it, is of course, logically, rooted in a sense of the dangers and pitfalls of a form of what we can simply call de-humanization. But, as should already be clear, for Friedmann, those forces which stand in the way of becoming human *in his time and place* (at least), are those which are native to the technological adventure of human beings in the 20th century. And it is in and through his study of this “adventure,” so exhaustively and reflectively charted for us in *La puissance*, that he is lead to identify the phenomena—that is, the danger—of what he calls the “Great Disequilibrium.” That phenomenon is the result of *the overwhelming pace and depth of technological change* experienced in both “East” and “West” in the early- and mid-20th Century, and the most important contemporary source of the dehumanizing imbalance he seeks to counter.

However, Friedmann’s assessment—and this point is crucial—is rooted firmly and precisely in an understanding of the reciprocal relationship between the effect of human labor upon our (built or natural) environment, and the subsequent impact of those changes and that work back upon us. In other words, for Friedmann, *when we labor upon our world, we labor upon ourselves,* an insight no doubt rooted in the Marxism from which he will never truly depart. As he says, “I do not believe, and I emphasize this here in order to avoid any misunderstanding, in an immutable human nature. In dominating the environment that we are given, human beings are able, reciprocally, to aid in our own transformations, our ascent towards our own heights—our humanization.”[[21]](#footnote-21) And despite his hopeful tone here, he very clearly sees this reciprocal relationship as a neutral fact of human life, one that is *also* at the heart of the problems he seeks to diagnose.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Indeed, it is the inexorable feedback-loop of the effect that our labor has on *the very conditions under which we subsequently labor* that is now marked by imbalance, and which has produced the “condition” diagnosed as the Great Disequilibrium:

But with the emergence of technological civilization, our environment has begun to constantly and profoundly evolve: a torrent of technological changes, world wars and social wars, the fever of everyday life. No possibility has the chance to truly clear a new path, or to fix itself in a stable set of behaviors—in instinct. The stimulations which issue from the technical milieu multiply themselves in a way that is superabundant, disordered, and chaotic. We can say the same thing for the reactions which correspond to them within the individual, on the level of sensibility and action. What had constituted the principle fabric of our psychic lives, in the natural milieu, has been diminished or even disappeared without having (not yet anyway) been replaced.[[23]](#footnote-23)

In Friedmann’s view, the overwhelming nature of the technological change which we ourselves have brought about, effects us in such a way that we have “lost control” as it were over both our own works and the conditions under which they are produced. It is for this reason that he devotes dozens and dozens of pages to innumerable examples of what he simply calls “The Power of Things over human beings,”[[24]](#footnote-24) which can be anything from the privileged example of nuclear weapons,[[25]](#footnote-25) to automobiles,[[26]](#footnote-26) to the effects of all of these technologies on human biology[[27]](#footnote-27) and psychology, to any of the other “technological horrors” personally witnessed or reported to him during the war, in the post-war West, in the Soviet Union, and so on.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The Great Disequilibrium is thus defined “by the increasing disproportion between, on the one hand, the multitudinous forms of power that technological progress confers on human beings, and on the other the moral forces that we have at our command to truly deploy them [these technological changes] in the service of both the individual and society.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Or as he puts it later, it is a disequilibrium between “the power and non-control of technology, and the debility of moral forces,”[[30]](#footnote-30) specifically the forces necessary for us to control the products of our labor and prevent them from controlling us. He refers to this compromised situation under the heading of “man inferior to his works.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

### iii. The Futility of Nostalgia.

And yet, despite the rather dire tone of his description in the early sections of *La puissance,* Friedmann is equally clear that this is in no way a lament for something “lost,” but rather a *diagnosis* of his (our?) present situation, and thus the exigencies particular to it:

I do not believe, however, that we are now merely experiencing a new episode of the same grand misery that has trundled its way through history. This misery, this impoverishment, has always been profoundly embedded in *a society*, in *a culture*. Though a fact of civilization, it is not and cannot be the same, for example, in the United States in 1970 and in the medieval West….Today, it is tied to the Great Disequilibrium, from which emerge the varying differences in its depth and extension, according to time and place. All tolled, the manifestation—which imposes itself with tragic evidence—of a moral under-development in industrially evolved societies corresponds to the acceleration of technological progress in the past century.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

These *specific* problems, these particular questions, could never have emerged before, because the conditions which have produced them have never existed before. Friedmann is neither a luddite nor a romantic, and when he poses the question, “Doesn’t the experience of the 20th century confirm the responsibility for these evils which Marxism attributes to ‘capitalist’ modes of production?”[[33]](#footnote-33) we cannot confuse this *description* of the problem with an *endorsement* of a nostalgic call back to some past form of life, no doubt suffused with its *own* particular troubles and dangers:

…nostalgia for the past only merits a brief halt. Ineluctable technological progress, the universe that surrounds us, summon us to continue on our journey. The present is rich with possibilities, and in the tumult that comes with it, old virtues founder. An equilibrium—imperfect, and limited to certain privileged zones, but which had the virtue of existing—disappears, and another has not replaced it.[[34]](#footnote-34)

In sum, we *cannot* go back—nor *should we.*

We *cannot* because technological change is “An Irreversible March”—a telling subheading which appears in §I. *Signs*, of Part I., *The Great Disequilibrium*, of *La puissance.* This is not a naive teleological claim, nor is the important point here that change itself is inevitable (though he certainly holds that view). Rather, one implication of the inevitability of change is the fact that all times and places carry with them their own particular problems, challenges and dangers. A utopian nostalgia is not merely impractical and unrealistic, it is undesirable because it amounts to trading one set of problems for another—and without the benefits that new forms of work, modes of production, and so on *do indeed* carry with them.

Thus we *should not* go back because the path of technological change holds so much genuine promise. Friedmann is quite clear, from the very outset, in affirming that “Technological progress is a good when it delivers human beings from pain and slavery,”[[35]](#footnote-35) and there is no doubt for him that it very much *can* do so, and much more. At the same time, he is under no illusion regarding the real problems, and thus real challenges, that these changes necessarily bring with them. The point is simply that technological change is neither “good” nor “bad,” but rather at once inherently promising *and* inherently dangerous:

Milling machine, transfer machine, cranes, digging machines, computers, Rolleiflex cameras, washing machines, transistors, submarines, automobiles, cars, space ships—not a single one of these ‘machines’ *can* be used in the service of human beings, of our bodies and minds, without compromising our health, our freedom, our understanding of the world. And yet, at the same time, they all possess the capacity for aiding us in passing, in the words of the sage, from a lesser state of perfection to a superior one. Even assembly-line work (a form so passionately discussed in terms of the division of labor) can be beneficial in certain economic and social conditions, *if* they are combined with precautions which neutralize their dangers.[[36]](#footnote-36)

It is from *this* perspective that Friedmann asks, “Can we suppress, or at least reduce, the Disequilibrium which thus results for human beings? And if so, by what means? These are some of the questions to which this book will attempt to respond.”[[37]](#footnote-37) The task, and no easy one to be sure, is to identify the conditions under which that promise can be developed, and the means by which those dangers “suppressed,” or at least minimized.

But it is a task that is possible: In maintaining that we are shaped by forces “outside” of ourselves, he also explicitly maintains the possibility of actively and consciously engaging in that shaping. Indeed, such a conclusion follows directly from his understanding of the relationship of human beings to our labor, above all with regard to the reciprocal nature of the ways in which that labor shapes our environment, which re-shapes us, and so on. If in laboring upon the world, we labor upon ourselves, and if our goal is to alter the results of that labor in some way, we must first understand the *particular* dynamics of these processes within the *specific* conditions in which we find ourselves.

In other words, in order to respond to the problem in any meaningful way, we have to describe it first: “Here in the final third of the 20th century, we engage in the technological Adventure particular to us at a moment so fraught with dangers. How can we overcome those dangers without understanding them—without studying them?”[[38]](#footnote-38) What are the effects of these technological changes, and the labor so intimately tied to it? How does our awareness of those effects shape our choices in determining what *kind* of work we take up, upon *which objects,* in what modes, and so on? And, therefore, if appropriate “means” must be appropriate to *these specific questions, problems and conditions*, how must we tailor those means, our tactics and strategies, in response?

### iv. From “Exterior” Solutions to the “Interior Effort.”

**i.** Friedmann’s first steps in attempting to think through how best to address the problem of the Great Disequilibrium were characterized by what he refers to as a certain “exteriority.” Given his diagnosis of the origins of the situation in the fundamentally material conditions of technological change, and the goal of achieving the “the humanization of technology,”[[39]](#footnote-39) that balance in which “the machine is adapted to the person (and not the inverse, as has been and remains so often the case),”[[40]](#footnote-40) it was certainly reasonable to assume that scientific, technological, and economic responses would more than suffice:

In brief, I had accorded the social and biological sciences the power to work together toward the humanization of work, attacking—*by way of external remedies* [emphasis added]—the evils which come from uncontrolled (un-dominated by human beings) mechanization, which menace the physical and psychic equilibrium of human producers. I had faith in the ability of science to come to the aid of the body and spirit of working human beings, to defend them from the effects of anarchic and rapacious industrialization.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Although this approach and this sentiment are quite clearly rooted in the Marxism from which he will never truly depart, and although his concerns do not actually change that much over the course of his life,[[42]](#footnote-42) Friedmann will come to see the limits of such strictly “exterior” approaches: “The “exterior” remedies which have been recommended in order to humanize, insofar as is possible, both work and leisure time are, certainly, worthy of discussion…. I continue to think that they can, together, provide great benefits. But I see now the limits of their efficacy much more than I had at first.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Such means do have a role, but a very specific one: “Exterior remedies constitute our defense against these dangers. But in this New Frontier, we most engage in an *offensive,* though quotidian, form of combat, an endless struggle within the indefinite field which calls to us: the mastery of technology, its humanization.”[[44]](#footnote-44) It is thus his understanding of the *means* by which the Great Disequilibrium must be addressed that will shift, for reasons already implicit in the story that Friedmann has been telling so far.

**ii. Exterior approaches in the Eastern Bloc.** First and perhaps most simply, Friedmann’s abiding skepticism for political, statist, and purely technological responses is rooted in a very real, and very deep relationship with life and death in the USSR. The political and personal horrors of the eras of Lenin and Stalin “Cast a crude light upon the disequilibrium between political power and the moral misery of those who have so atrociously abused it in the name of a doctrine of justice, proclaiming the reconciliation of human beings with ourselves.”[[45]](#footnote-45) But the point is not, and this must be stressed, that the gulag is for Friedmann a damning indictment of socialism *tout court*, or of its ideals. He does not abandon Marx or Marxism based on these observations or events, he does not recoil into “moralism.” The issue is rather that in both the more spectacular political troubles of Soviet life and, far more importantly, in its mundane goings-on, it became clear to Friedmann that “The dominant values of technological civilization exercise their corruptive force just as much in Moscow as in Washington, in Paris as in Beijing,”[[46]](#footnote-46) and the respective “technological adventures” of East and West in the 20th century had far more in common than partisans of either form of economic life would care to admit.

The Great Disequilibrium was to him just as apparent in the Eastern Block as in the West, and socialism—at least in its Leninist and Maoist forms—showed itself, first hand, to not only fail to address the problems apparent in the West, but to *evince* them in many of the same ways, and for many of the same reasons: “The fundamental traits of a technological milieu comparable to that of the Western societies had already appeared within the “socialist patrimony.”[[47]](#footnote-47) In other words, both the *political and technological* aspects of the socialism he saw first-hand as a young man, and observed from abroad until his death in the 1970s, had failed to achieve the “human face,”[[48]](#footnote-48) the*“nouvelle morale socialiste,”[[49]](#footnote-49)* he worked so thoroughly to describe, and which he felt was the very condition of the success of any socialism worthy of the name. The Second World was to him as clearly marked by the Great Disequilibrium as the First.

***[Is more discussion of his reasons for coming to question “exterior” solutions, beyond the problems in the socialist world, needed here? Larger question: to what extent do I really need to make GF’s case for him, beyond simply describing his reasoning and motivations for taking his concerns with Spiritual Exercises in the direction that he ultimately will?]***

**iii.** If that political domain which was founded upon the very principle of the rectification of the relationship of human beings to our labor, *within* a modern, technological and industrialized context, could fail so spectacularly to achieve that balance, then Friedmann would conclude *not* that socialism was hopeless, but that there was something overly simplistic about his reasoning: “In light of these repeated shocks, I came to understand that my quasi-exclusive interest in “exterior” remedies had been the expression of a relatively simplistic scientific materialism.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Here he tellingly goes on to cite Marx,[[51]](#footnote-51) before continuing to describe this “scientism,” and its limits:

This form of scientism is no more justified than any of the others. These ‘exterior’ remedies are useful, certainly, and even necessary, but not sufficient. Bad institutions are not solely responsible for the ‘limits of the human factor.’ These limits are inscribed within human beings themselves. As with our physical, social and psychic environment, it is upon human beings and from human beings that we must reflect, and provoke action.”[[52]](#footnote-52)

But if these limits are inscribed within us, that inscription is itself the result of the complex and reciprocating relationship between laboring subjects, the work we do, and the work that is done to us, and so on: “Labor, such as it is carried out every day by the masses of workers, of employees, constitutes a vast terrain in which the ‘conditioning’ of human beings by our new milieu takes place.”[[53]](#footnote-53) As we have seen, those conditions effect our responses to them, in the work that we do, the way we do it, and so on: “In order to control our new milieu (that is, to “humanize” it), we are compelled to make choices. But in order to make those choices, we must rely upon values and the people who live them. How can we break from this circle?”[[54]](#footnote-54) Thus on this account, if “exterior” conditions (and “conditioning”) produce “interior” effects, and vice-versa, then to meet our material conditions only on the level of their materiality is to fundamentally misconstrue the nature of the dynamic in question, and to thereby impair the development of any strategically effective response.

**iv. The “Interior Effort.”** It is for these reasons, which I have sketched far too briefly here, that Friedmann finally comes to the conclusion that the kinds of “exterior” solutions to the disequilibrium—which again is itself in large part a *material* imbalance—wrought by the kinds of technological, economic and thus social change in contemporary life, must be met with what he calls an “interior effort:”

In highlighting both the necessity and insufficiency of “exterior” remedies to the difficulties that have emerged in a technological society, both within work and outside of work, we have at the same time revealed the need for an *interior* effort in order bring our own technical progress under control, and thus to insure the moral and physical future of our species. It now becomes a question of studying the chances, the limits of such an effort, and, through these reflections, to discern the forces capable of reducing, and perhaps one day suppressing, the disequilibrium, of which we have already taken note of many signs.[[55]](#footnote-55)

But, and this should be quite clear by this point, *La puissance* is not a prescriptive text, or not exactly, but rather a preliminary analysis, a study, and diagnosis: “I have no pretension however of providing a ‘system’ here, or of drawing up a structured and exhaustive list of values. Any such values would need to emerge from the critical observation of this new milieu and thus, in a manner of speaking, have directed my attention ‘to the terrain.’”[[56]](#footnote-56) In more general terms, there is no universal or trans-historical form of “interior effort,” norcan the internal work of differing times and places be simply re-purposed for the exigencies of another—not without the kind of thoroughgoing assessment he describes here, and a rigorous translation of given forms of life, practice, and belief based firmly in such analysis.

Indeed, among the dangers of proceeding without such rigor, he identifies the specter of precisely that spiritualism from which he and the other writers that I have invoked are at such pains to distance themselves:

Some of course have sensed the need to cultivate new spiritual forces in contemporary man, but very few among even those are oriented in the only constructive direction: to search for these new forces *in and through the recognition of the technological progress in question*, through what Karl Jaspers calls a “loyalty” to the realities of the 20th century. Lacking that loyalty, the denunciation of the dangers of technological progress so often devolves into a mythical nostalgia for the past, which in turn leads, as the case may be, to a global rejection of modernity, a negative and desperate attitude, an escape into *spiritualism* or mystical comforts, and religious or secular forms of retreat from the world.[[57]](#footnote-57)

While a superficial reading would make it seem as though Friedmann is merely concerned with exchanging the interior for the exterior, to do so would amount to precisely that “spiritualism” against which he (and Hadot, Foucault, and others) caution against.[[58]](#footnote-58) And not, again, for any merely aesthetic reasons, but because it still trades in a political and moral framework of mere opposition, which fails to understand the complexity of the relationship between these seemingly distinct “domains.” In Friedmann’s terms, both *Marxism naïf* and“spiritualism” (and indeed its “moralist” ethical-political counterpart), all rest upon the same set of distinctions, the same general framework, even if they take up opposing positions within that shared field.

**v.** And so it is here that Friedmann finally sets out the task of *La puissance*, to discover a form of “interior effort” proper to contemporary life, in its ability to address the imbalance wrought by the particulars of technological change, without lapsing into a vapid spiritualism, useless nostalgia, conservative moralism, or failing to understand the complex reciprocal relationship between material conditions and “spiritual” life. As undeveloped as it ultimately is in the text, his is a counter-discourse, a counter-conception which abandons the former terms altogether. “Human beings are called today to undertake an interior conversion, one that is much more than a psychological adaptation to this new milieu. Only this conversion can allow us to take our own future in hand, to unlock it, at once on the level of the individual, of society, *and* of the species; a path of salvation, a new frontier, a long and decisive march.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Or as he says a page later, “It is not a question of human beings learning to become God, but rather learning to become human.”[[60]](#footnote-60) The question is, of course, *how?* And, moreover, what exactly would this “humanization” look like?

For Friedmann, any real answer can only arrive at the end of this long work, itself the product of a lifetime:

But are these reflections, these regrets, in vain? Are we, today, given our mental and physical constitution, the state of our nervous systems and the state of our relationship with our new environment, capable of controlling these same machines, of actually dominating and subjugating them? Only at the end of this book will I attempt to discern the price of such an effort, and to determine the conditions under which, and the culture within which, we human beings may finally reveal ourselves as superior to our own works.[[61]](#footnote-61)

And yet, Friedmann has accomplished a great deal in this text already, in terms of both explicitly identifying the problems and questions that trouble him, and laying out several of the criteria that any appropriate “interior effort” will have to meet in order to address them.

**vi. spiritual exercises.**

## V. Conclusions

### i. The Emergence of New Practices.

### ii. The Politics of Spiritual Exercise: From Egoism to Moralism.

1. Emmanuel Kant, “Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion,” in *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 409. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Georges Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 11. Despite his relative importance in France as a sociologist of labor, his expertise on and work within the Soviet Union, the publication of his war journals and his long and deep engagement with the philosophical tradition (cf. his *Leibniz et Spinoza*, Gallimard, 1946), Friedmann remains little-known in the Anglophone world, with next to none of his work having been translated since his death in 1977. For that reason, all translations from Friedmann’s work are my own.  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. « Mais au fur et à mesure que ce travail avançait, les événements, des expériences personnelles et collectives m’imposaient des révisions déchirants qui changeaient profondément mon dessein. En 1945, tendu vers un humanisme capable de « transformer *effectivement* la condition humaine », je n’oubliais pas les conditions morales dont dépendait sa réalisation mais je les plaçais au troisième rang, après les conditions économiques et sociales. Aujourd’hui, sans nier le rôle de ces derniers—tant s’en faut, on le constatera—ce sont les conditions morales dont l’observation de notre monde m’a conduit à affirmer le rôle essentiel. Après avoir, durant ma période de marxisme naïf, accordé un privilège quasi exclusif aux dimensions « matérielles », j’ai de plus en plus clairement perçu la dimension spirituelle, actuellement si méprisé : pourtant, sans elle, il n’y aura jamais de socialisme à visage humain. » (ibid., 10.) Note that here I’ve translated “déchirant” as “disruptive;” however, it is possible that the term “disrupting” may come closer, when taken literally, to the sense of a real *break,* and the intellectual reconstruction necessitated by such a break, in his thinking that Friedmann emphasizes here. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See his *Journal de guerre, 1939-1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), a text to which we will return several times here. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. That this point is rather urgent for Friedmann might be read into the fact that in the text itself, there is actually a footnote at the bottom of the page directing the reader to this endnote. (*La puissance et la sagesse*, 10.) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. « 3. Ce terme ( « spirituel ») surprendra, choquera même, peut-être, certains lecteurs. Il m’a quelque peu gêné moi-même par ses résonances, son association avec des doctrines ou dogmes « spiritualistes » qui me sont étrangers. Mais aucun autre ne permettrait de désigner globalement le *potentiel* des forces d’intelligence et d’amour dont l’homme, quelque défavorisé soit-il par le sort, dispose et qui sont à la origine, à la mesure aussi, de sa liberté (cf. 5e Partie, II, « La révolution spirituelle »).¶ Ces forces, pour les raisons les plus diverses, peuvent demeurer virtuelles, inactives, ou se déployer : en ce case je les ai souvent qualifiés de « morales ». Il m’est arrivé, néanmoins, d’employer indifféremment l’un ou l’autre de ces adjectifs. » (ibid., 443.) Note that another way of rendering this last sentence, in particular the clause “il m’est arrivé,” would be something like “*It has occurred to me*, however, to use these adjectives interchangeably,” which, depending on how we read Friedmann, may well render the passage far more accurately. From this perspective, rather than an accident that comes about by a somewhat loose use of technical language, Friedmann can be read as making an intentional decision to bring together and blur the line between the terms “moral” and “spiritual;” this being, potentially, a *realization* (something that “occurred to him”) similar in kind and certainly in origin to the shift in his thought described in the initial passage, cited above, to which these remarks are appended as a footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford; New York: Blackwell, 1995), 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A term which will itself require a great deal of specification here. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. As Robert Wuthnow, among others, has documented, “growing numbers of Americans say they are spiritual but not religious, [and] many say that their spirituality is growing but the impact of religion on their lives is diminishing.” (Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkely & Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1998), 2.) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Michel Foucault, “On The Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of a Work in Progress,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, *Essential works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984* (New York: The New Press, 1994), 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005), 12. Interestingly, it is of *Foucault’s* own work that Hadot poses the question of whether or not what we have in the former’s notion of “the care of the self” is nothing more than “a new form of Dandyism, late twentieth-century style.” (Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, 211.) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, 115, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Indeed, this is the title of Part I of his text; see Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 15-109. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 11. Note that Friedmann’s wording here, in speaking of the “questions that he has attempted to live,” or in French “les questions qu’il a tenté de vivre,” is unmistakably reminisicent of the poet Paul Valéry’s “Le cimitière marin,” whose final stanza famously begins with the line “Le vent se lève! . . . il faut tenter de vivre!” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Indeed, as I will argue in various ways throughout the present work, it is *only* insofar as a relationship such as this is a source of certain problems that it can also be a means of remedying them. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. “The most convincing proof of the Power of Things over human beings today is to be found in our attitude with regard to the nuclear menace.” (ibid.) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See ibid., 59-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. “The progress of scientific and technical knowledge (each so effected by the other) has brought about for us, *as living organisms*, a number of consequences, though there is no need to enumerate them all here. I will content myself to highlight the variety of biological transformations which can be observed in the new millieu of industrialized societies.” (ibid., 39, emphasis added.) He then goes on to speak about birth and death rates, infant mortality, life expectancy, changes in age of puberty and menopause—all phenomena which are, tellingly, either identical to or reminscent of those which Foucault inscribes within the concept of biopolitics. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See ibid., 48-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 108. Indeed, in making this point he eloquently articulates one of the fundamental and recurring problems of any discussion of spiritual exercises, to which we will return throughout the present work. It is also interesting to note that Friedmann thought that the coming digital society, which he foresaw in the 1970s, would simply be an extension of industrialization—and, moreover, could not be separated from the industrial means and forms of labor which would produce, for example computers, mine the materials that constitute them, etc. This is why, at least on a certain reading, his insights remain relevant for us today: “We are still living in this age, and it is unclear when it will end;” (ibid.) or as he more succinctly puts it, “The game is not over.” (ibid., 109.) [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 17. See also his cautious endorsements of many of the other technological facts of contemporary life, and the potential for human flourishing that they *can* carry with them, but which are so often dismissed outright: “It is necessary to study, with a sympathy denuded of any superiority complex, in accepting the potential values of a ‘mass culture,’ entirely different from that of classical humanism, the goods of cultural consumption diffused by the *mass media.*” (ibid., 115.) [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 19. Many thanks to Marie McDonough for her help in translating this very challenging passage in Friedmann. After much discussion and debate, I have chosen to take some liberties with the letter of the text in order to render what we agree is very clearly its spirit. The original reads as follows: “Tour à reproduire, machine transfert, grue pelleteuse ou ordinateur, récepteur de télévision ou rolleiflex, machine à laver et transistor, sous-marin, automobile, avoi, cabine interplanétaire—il n’est aucune de ces « machines » qui ne *puisse* être mis au service de l’homme, de son corps et (ou) de son esprit, sans compremettre sa santé, sa liberté, sa compréhension du monde, mais au contraire en le faissant passer, selon le mot du sage, d’une perfection moindre « à une perfection supérieure. » Même les méthodes de travail « à la chaine » (forme si passionnément discutée de la division du travail) peuvent être bénéfiques, dans certaines conditions économiques et sociales, si on les assortit de précautions qui neutralisent leurs dangers. » [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 23. Or, as he poses the question at the end of Part I, “Could we succeed, at a different stage of organization and wisdom, to overcome the physical, psychic, and social evils that [the Grand Disequilibrium] has multiplied? For our species, the “enthusiasm” of our Technological Adventure is hardly a century old; so very little time. Was Marx in fact more correct than the theoreticians of post-industrial society in situating his own époque within the prehistory of humanity?” (ibid., 109.) [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. “I never once felt the need to abandon my essential preoccupations: it is and has always been a question for me of the same technological Adventure, but approached from a different angle.” (ibid., 115.) [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 102. He seems (and *La puissance* is less explicit on this point) to want to tie the top-down political atrocities of the USSR to the presence of the Great Disequilibrium of life and work in the Second World as well, although because the text is so vague on this point, I hesitate to attribute such a strong, and potentially reductive, causal claim to him here. There is certainly a relationship between mundane life in the USSR and the terror of Stalin for Friedmann, but he never explicitly spells it out for us. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid., 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. **[Find and include Marx citation in English].** [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid., 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid., 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid., 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. See above, §I. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Friedmann, *La puissance et la sagesse*, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid., 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid., 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)