Philosophy as a Way of Life: Texts and Studies

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Aims and Scope

Philosophy as a Way of Life (PWL) is both a meta-philosophy and a methodological approach to the study of philosophy, inspired by the work of the French scholar Pierre Hadot (1922-2010). As a methodology, PWL emphasizes that all ancient philosophical works reflect pedagogical and psychagogic concerns, and argues that these features should continue to be taken into account in contemporary philosophy. Constraints of literary genre must be also be considered, constraints which dictated that an ancient author could not say whatever she pleased in any context. Therefore, the modern reader must try to understand for what purpose such works were written, and to which audience they were addressed. It is this principle, Hadot argued, rather than developmental hypotheses, that best explain the apparent inconsistencies and incoherencies that modern scholars continue to find in ancient works of philosophy.

Crucially, PWL also has a view of the nature and function of philosophy itself. Hadot argued that philosophy is profoundly transformational. It is based largely on the practice of “spiritual exercises”, intended to transform the practitioner’s way of perceiving the world, and hence her mode of being, in order to enable her to lead a freer, more happy existence. Hadot envisages this process as a return to the self: not our everyday, individualistic self, torn by worries about the past and present, but to a self that is more authentically ours, and is identical to our moral person, “open to universality and objectivity, and participating in the universal nature of thought” (Hadot 1995, 103).

Call for Proposals:

Philosophy as a Way of Life: Texts and Studies will make available English translations of key studies on PWL and publish scholarly monographs and edited collections that consider its different aspects and implications. The editors of PWL welcome proposals:
- investigate the concept of PWL in antiquity, the renaissance and early modern periods
- use PWL as a methodological approach to the history of philosophy
- show the implications of PWL for understandings of education and its history
- explore the cross-cultural possibilities opened up by work on PWL in Western thought
- examine the relationships between PWL and certain widely recognized fields of later modern disciplinary philosophy, such as virtue ethics and philosophy of culture
- or examine PWL written in a different literary genre beyond that of the academic essay (from philosophical dialogue and fiction to meditations and journaling), and while taking into account the way such genres impact the style and content of ancient, medieval and early modern philosophical works.

Audience

Works in this series will be of interest, firstly, to academic professionals and students interested in the history of the discipline, intellectual historians and historians of philosophy, philosophers of culture, ethicists, classicists and students of classical, Hellenistic, and Roman thought, intercultural philosophers, philosophers and historians of education and the university, religious studies, literary studies, ecology and environmental studies, and more. Secondly, key studies will be of interest to the large, extra-academic audience already engaged by Pierre Hadot’s works: people working in nursing, philosophical coaching, philosophical psychotherapy, and the global Neo- or Modern Stoic movements, a network of people trying to reactivate Stoicism as a way of life.

Rationale

Since Michael Chase's translation of Pierre Hadot's work in Philosophy as a Way of Life: From Socrates to Foucault in 1995 and What is Ancient Philosophy? in 2000, there has been a rapidly growing scholarly and popular interest in the idea of philosophy as a way of life (PWL). Hadot's conception of ancient Western and Near-Eastern philosophy as intending to change the mode of perception, and hence the mode of being of its practitioners has paved the way for new avenues of historical and philosophical research within the academy and opened the door for philosophy to engage more broadly in cultural life outside of the university. Hadot's work raises the concern that academic philosophy
has become, in no small measure, a kind of factory for producing more philosophy professors. Meanwhile, the technical jargon of philosophical journals has increasingly made philosophy inaccessible to anybody without a professional specialization, at the same time as governments are becoming increasingly dubious about philosophy's public utility, and the usefulness of the humanities more broadly conceived.

Hadot's own clarity of expression, and avoidance of esoteric jargon, has enabled his works to engage broad audiences, who might otherwise have had next to no interest in philosophy or its history. PWL envisages philosophy as potentially having a direct, immediate, and positive impact on the lives of persons of all ages, genders, races, sexual orientations, religions, and political persuasions. Hadot's work points towards the redemocratizing of philosophy, as is shown by the adoption of PWL by people working in nursing, organization and management studies, religious studies, literary studies, ecology and environmental studies, and many extra-academic fields. For example, philosophical coaching and Neo- or Modern Stoicism, a heterogeneous network of people who are adopting Stoicism as a way of life, are very much influenced by PWL literature.

Inside the academy, PWL also has been flourishing, with growing numbers of conference events and the lucrative Mellon grant based at Notre Dame dedicated to considering PWL's pedagogical dimensions. Hadot's work speaks also to intellectual historians and has been taken up and applied to philosophy in the medieval, renaissance, and early modern periods by leading scholars such as Juliusz Domanski, Peter Harrison, Stephen Gaukroger, and John Sellars. Within French-language scholarship, Hadot's work inspired the later Foucault and those influenced by him; Hadot's own reserves with regard to Foucault's thought will constitute an important subject for further study in the context of PWL. A growing body of intercultural philosophy literature on the idea of PWL has begun to appear, such as David Fiordalis' collection, *Buddhist Spiritual Practices* as well as several essays in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancients and Moderns: Essays in Honor of Pierre Hadot*.

Nevertheless, despite the growing prominence of PWL, a great deal of central PWL literature remains unavailable to English-language scholars and readers. This includes many of Pierre Hadot's own essays on the ancients, as well as his pioneering work on Wittgenstein; Ilsetraut Hadot's magisterial study *Sénèque: direction spirituelle et pratique de la philosophie* (German original 1969, thoroughly revised and updated French edition 2014), as well as important studies
by André-Jean Voelke (*La philosophie comme thérapie de l’âme. Études de philosophie hellénistique*), the Polish scholar Juliusz Domański, and Paul Rabbow’s groundbreaking 1954 study *Seelenführung: Methodik der Exerzitien in der Antike*.

At the same time, there still is a real dearth of secondary literature on PWL, as compared to to the scale and significance of its academic and growing extra-academic receptions. Some of this literature arguably carries forwards basic misunderstandings of PWL, led by the claim that its stress on ancient philosophical practices devalues the place of written, rational argumentation, collapses philosophy and ‘religion’, and licenses facile, ‘feel good’ notions which do not withstand philosophical or historical scrutiny. The time has come for a new series of translated texts on PWL, coupled with edited volumes and monographs on the different components of the idea of PWL as it impacts upon contemporary philosophy, the university, and society.

Among Pierre Hadot’s most important scholarly achievements was to show that, at least since the time of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, Stoic philosophy was divided into three parts: logic, physics, and ethics. The first domain of study concerned the mind and was thus roughly equivalent to our category of epistemology. The second was the domain of the natural world: today, it would correspond today not only to physics in the sense of particle physics or thermodynamics, but also to the study of ecology, and even to aesthetics insofar as it is concerned with human reactions to the beauty of nature. Finally, in Stoicism, the domain of ethics includes what we still mean by that term: the formation of the character. But it also corresponds to what we now understand by the study of politics and society, insofar as the goal of such studies is to first conceive, and then to work towards, a global human community that is maximally characterized by justice. Let us briefly return to each of these three subdomains, bearing in mind that Hadot himself, far from pursuing the illusory revival of any “pure” versions of ancient philosophical principles, was well aware of the need to adapt all such principles to modern circumstances. He not only saw the need to prune such principles of their outdated aspects, but was also quite happy to recommend, with Nietzsche, the often-denigrated approach of “eclecticism”, or adopting doctrinal elements from several different philosophical schools. Above all, it should be born in mind that, as for the Stoics the virtues mutually permeated and entailed one another, so we do not consider that there are be hard and fast boundaries between the three basic areas of study. On the contrary, they are intimately linked and interwoven: there are few aspects of the study of “logic”, understood as epistemology
broadly construed, that have no implications for and repercussions on “physics” and “ethics”; “physics”, understood as the study of nature, thoroughly permeates and interacts with the other two domains, etc. One might speak of a reciprocal implication or a dialectical, inseparable unity between the three fields, a unity which could itself be the subject of worthwhile studies.

1. In Stoicism, there was a theoretical “logic” or epistemology, concerned with elaborating theories of logic, cognition, and epistemology. But there was also a “lived” or experiential logic which we are to practice in our everyday lives, at every waking instant. This discipline of thought entailed vigilance over our impressions or representations (Greek *phantasiai*), so that we do not give consent too quickly to such representations before we have ensured that they are objectively true and purified of our subjective prejudices. In other words, we must always question our “instinctive” value judgements and refrain from yielding to them automatically or mindlessly. The Stoics believed that in the process of thought, we receive information from the outside world that is imprinted on our senses. Sometimes, this information is immediately and undoubtedly true: it is what the Stoics call an objective representation (*phantasia katalêptikê*), which entails assent because it is a clear idea originating from and accurately representing an object that truly exists in external reality. On other occasions, however, we receive impressions or representations that are distorted by our passions, emotions, or prejudices: in this case, Stoic vigilance or attentiveness, on the cognitive level, consists in refusing to assent to our initial impression before we have adequately weighed the evidence. One Stoic spiritual exercise thus consisting in breaking down or analyzing the ideas or impressions that exert a very strong initial attraction or aversion upon us.

In terms of the contemporary world, this “logical” domain of study would correspond, not only to logic in the modern sense of the term, but also to what is now referred to as critical thought. Its areas of applicability might include the problem of “fake news”: how do we discern what is factual from what is misleading in the constant stream of information with which the media bombards us every day? By what criteria are we to discern truth from falsehood? For Marcus Aurelius, truth was a virtue: is this still a viable stance today, in what has been designated as the “Post-Truth Era”? What is the appropriate attitude to adopt to Marcus’ emphasis, stressed by Hadot, on the notion of “objectivity”? Does it exclude all forms of relativism? Is the “god’s-eye-view” presented as an ideal to be achieved in such spiritual exercises as the “View from above”, akin to a kind of proto-scientism, insofar as it presupposes the possibility and desirability of an objective, passion-free view of reality as it really it, stripped
of the distorting influences of all personal subjectivity? Or is it more akin to the vision of reality as itself, or “suchness”, achieved by some practitioners of Zen Buddhism?

On a more formal epistemological level, the questions to be raised might include: what theory of truth shall we defend? What metaphysics and/or ontology shall we adopt? Is realism a viable option? On the level of psychology, how can we resist the distractions to which we are exposed by this constant flow of information? What is the role of attention in this context? Assuming that it plays a key role in learning and in our ethical development, how can we best promote its development and maintenance? Here we should consider the possible role of contemporary mindfulness practices, with their parallels in both ancient Greco-Roman and Eastern philosophies and religions, and we shall attempt to deepen these insights by confronting the current extensive and continually growing literature on the neurological correlates of attention and mindfulness. Finally, on a methodological or metaphilosophical level, this may be the domain in which the distinctions and boundaries between philosophy, religion and mysticism should be discussed. What do these three fields of human endeavor and experience have in common, and what separates them? Is it true, as several critics have alleged, that Hadot’s conception of philosophy as consisting primarily in a program of self-perfection based on spiritual exercises minimizes the rational element of argumentation, analysis and problem-solving that, according to many, constitute the essence of philosophy? What is, after all, the nature of philosophy? Is there any merit to Chase’s proposal that Hadot’s conception of PWL might constitute a kind of “third way”, between Analytic and Continental philosophy?

2. As we have seen, the notion of “physics” had a much wider range of applications in ancient philosophy than it does today. It could refer to the philosophy of nature, broadly construed; but also, to what Pierre Hadot called “lived physics”, or physics as a spiritual exercise. Here the goal was for us to try to achieve what Hadot called “cosmic consciousness”: the awareness that we are an inseparable part or the cosmos. As Hadot points out, “The cosmic perspective implies a constantly renewed contemplation of the great laws of Nature (...) an intense meditation on the living unity of the Cosmos, on the harmony that makes all things correspond with one another”.

For the Stoics, by dint of this assiduous contemplation, we can come to realize that the universe is providentially arranged by divine Reason or the Logos. But since this divine Logos – also known as Zeus, Fate, or Nature, among other
names – is identical in substance to our own reason, we come to see that we are intimately related to the creative and guiding principles of the universe. We are, as the American molecular biologist and theorist Stuart Kauffmann put it in the title of one of his books, “At Home in the Universe”. On the basis of this realization, we can work to try to discipline our desires, so what we not only accept, but actively and joyfully consent to, and even desire all external events that happens to us in life.

Current studies of PWL will, of course, have to confront a crucial objection to this doctrine. If Greco-Roman “lived physics” was based on the assumption that the world is governed by a rational, providential Logos, can we still practice the disciplines and exercises associated with it now that most of us no longer believe, or believe only with important qualifications, in the existence of such a Logos? Once again, we encounter the crucial question of how ancient Greco-Roman philosophy must be modernized, updated, and shorn of elements we can no longer accept. Yet this must be done with the utmost care, to avoid trivializing the entire conceptual edifice of ancient philosophy and reducing it to a superficial self-help method.

As far as modern correspondences to the ancient domain of physics are concerned, although one should not exclude more strictly “scientific” questions as those concerning the creation or eternity of the universe, the origins of life as a biological phenomenon, the physiology of the brain and the nervous system, etc., there are even more urgent questions that face us today. What attitude should human beings adopt toward nature in this sense? What are the characteristics of our conception of nature, and how did this conception develop historically? Is Pierre Hadot’s distinction between a “Promethean” attitude, which views nature as a resource to be exploited, and an “Orphic” perspective, which views it primarily as a source of wisdom to be contemplated, still relevant today? Are nature and technology inevitably opposed, or can there be a synergy between them? What are the characteristics of the aesthetic pleasure we can derive from the contemplation of nature? Can such contemplation exert a positive formative effect on the human character, and perhaps even on the physiology of our nervous system? The most urgent issue in this domain is, of course, the challenge posed by human-generated climate change. How must we react to this challenge? In what ways should it modify our epistemic and ethical stance and our behavior? More generally, what can we learn from Nature, on the level not only of physics, but also of ethics and even of logic and epistemology?
3. Finally, there is the domain of ethics. In Antiquity, there is of course a theoretical ethics, in which, for teaching purposes, we construct theories of ethics, analyse the passions, provide descriptions of the ideal Sage, and draw up lists of virtues and vices. But there is also a lived or experiential ethics, in which we’re concerned with putting our teaching into practice and living in an ethical way, making sure that all our acts are intended for the benefit of the human community. This concern can assume two main forms: on the one hand, its deals with our personal development as a “moral” or “ethical” human being: in other words, it is about character formation, or what Hadot called “the quest for a higher level of the self”. On a less individual and more social level, it concerns how we get along with one another within civil society, and how we can best structure that society so that it manifests a maximum of justice.

As far as contemporary prospects for study and practical aspects of study are concerned, we can extend the ancient concept of ethics to the fields of politics and society. The fundamental question of ethics, now as in Antiquity, continues to be: how should we live? Therefore, theories of ethical transformation remain extremely important on an individual level: How can we become better people? How can we work on improving the defects of our character, and become kinder, gentler, and more understanding in our relations with others? Perhaps, under ethics, we could classify what Hadot claims is the goal of all ancient spiritual exercises, and therefore of all ancient philosophy: how can we transform our way of looking at the world, so that we can stop considering that the world revolves around us and our individualistic interests? In this perspective, our goal should be to try to view things from the perspective of the Whole, which pretty much amounts to Hadot’s notion of cosmic consciousness: seeing the big picture, rejoicing in the fact that we are consubstantial with the universe, transcending our petty individuality and realizing our basic unity, not only with all other members of the human race, but with all of nature.

On a social and political level, the challenges facing us today are vast: questions of the more equitable distribution of resources and the reduction of poverty, the preservation of world peace, the emerging fields of climate justice, and so on. Contrary to some current misunderstandings, we believe that practicing PWL does not entail a passive acceptance of unjust social conditions. The basic Stoic principle is, as we know, the distinction between what does and does not depend on us: we are to concentrate on what is up to us and consider everything else as indifferent. But questions of political, social and economic justice do depend on us and are up to us, and this implies not only ensuring
we always act in the interest of the human community, but that we maintain a rationally critical attitude in the face of the claims and assertions of parties of all tendencies and orientations. Maintaining such a critical attitude, and acting upon it when necessary, is the only adequate response to critics who claim that ancient philosophies like Stoicism and such philosophical religions as Buddhism are “narcissistic” because they are only concerned with personal self-improvement, and can even constitute an attempt to try to escape from the “real world” and take refuge in a kind of neo-monasticism. There is indeed a tendency in some circles of contemporary neo-Stoicism to amputate the entire domain of ethics, as well as that of physics, from the practice of Stoicism, leaving it as a mere self-help technique for dealing with adversity, equivalent to Prozac. Nowadays, Stoicism is often invoked to justify an attitude that boils down to saying, “I’m going to live however I want, and I don’t care what anybody else says or thinks or me”. But while, as we have seen, all ancient philosophical and religious systems need to be updated so that they correspond to contemporary concerns, this amputation of ethics seems to be a travesty that renders Stoicism incoherent. The three parts of Stoic philosophy, logic, physics, and ethics are woven together into a completely organic, indissoluble whole, and one cannot discard an entire discipline or domain of philosophy, such as ethics, without irrevocably disfiguring the whole and the other two domains. The same, arguably, holds true of PWL as a discipline today, although this point too could become the subject of fruitful debate.