

REVIEW

Pierre Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*. Translated by Marc Djaballah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), ISBN: 978-0804748353

This book contains a series of interviews conducted by J. Carlier and A. I. Davidson with Pierre Hadot, the famous French scholar of ancient philosophy. The interviews are arranged in ten chapters; the first two offer a short “intellectual biography” of Hadot; the remaining eight cover those topics that constitute the hallmark of Hadot’s thought. The literary genre of the interview makes the book very enjoyable to read, with difficult topics presented in a straightforward way that avoids technicalities without being trivial or superficial. The book offers an excellent introduction to the basic tenets of Hadot’s revolutionary interpretation of ancient philosophy and arouses in the reader the curiosity to read his more scholarly works. *The Present Alone is Our Happiness* is, however, not just an introduction to Hadot’s thought but also a learned and stimulating discussion of the essence of philosophy. Intellectuals interested in investigating the question “what is philosophy?” will find this book insightful. The breadth and engaging style of *The Present Alone is Our Happiness* makes this book suitable not only for scholars but also for students – the book would be beneficial for any “introduction to philosophy” course.

The Present Alone is Our Happiness can be read from many different perspectives. Those who are familiar with Hadot’s works will find particularly fascinating the first two chapters, which take us “behind the scene,” so to speak, to follow the intellectual and personal journey through which Hadot came to develop his interpretation of ancient philosophy. The way a scholar approaches a topic, the views he develops, and the style of research he employs are often the result of the combination of a series of particular factors that are strongly bound up with his personal life; this is particularly true in the case of Hadot, as the first two chapters demonstrate. In the first chapter Hadot recalls his experience as a young priest in a seminary, where the religious education he received allowed him to acquire 1) a firm knowledge of Ancient Greek and Latin, 2) a basic understanding of how to read ancient texts, 3) an initial acquaintance with philosophy. In remembering his high school years, Hadot mentions a telling event, his 1939 high school examination in philosophy, which consisted of commenting on a famous quotation by Bergson, viz., “Philosophy is not the construction of a system, but the resolution made once to look naively at the world in and around oneself.” (10) The enthusiasm, we are told, that the young Hadot had in discussing the relevance of philosophy for our life can be seen as an early indication of his inclination to consider philosophy not as an abstract enterprise but predominantly as an activity that has an existential value. Hadot’s adolescence was also the time when he developed the

profound interest in mysticism that subsequently led him to study Plotinus and Neoplatonism. It is pertinent that Hadot's scholarly interest in mysticism started when he was a teenager; this interest was motivated by his experience of being one with the Universe - the impression of "being part of a mysterious and infinite reality." (8) The second chapter continues Hadot's "intellectual biography" and places him within a French intellectual context. Hadot focuses on the significance of his encounter with the famous classicist Paul Henry, under whose supervision he completed his graduate work on Marius Victorinus. Under Henry he learnt philological rigor and how to read an ancient philosophy text with careful awareness of its historical context.

The initial two chapters of the book very effectively illustrate the relation between "Hadot the scholar" and "Hadot the man," but it is the remaining part of the text that is more thought-provoking. Each of the remaining eight chapters deals with key philosophical issues that are presented in such a way as to stimulate the reader to continue thinking about these issues rather than to provide the final word on the matter. It is this capacity to stimulate the reader's intellectual curiosity that is one of the main virtues of *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*. This book, however, also does a fine job in challenging some of the common assumptions of many contemporary philosophers. It advocates a way of studying ancient texts and of understanding philosophy that is very different from that prominent today, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, which regards philosophy as a purely academic discipline.

The third and fourth chapters investigate the challenges a scholar encounters when dealing with the text of an ancient author. Hadot wisely advocates the importance of taking into consideration the literary genre employed by an author when studying the text of an ancient philosopher, as the same philosophical view can be expressed in different ways depending on the particular aspect of the theory that the author intends to emphasize. In antiquity, hence, the author's choice to write, e.g., a dialogue, as opposed to a consolation or a letter, gives us an indication of what specific aspect of a given theory he intends to highlight. Hadot's suggestion to take into account the literary genre of an ancient text when we interpret it should be taken seriously, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world where the tendency is to treat ancient philosophical texts as if they were written by contemporary analytic philosophers, a practice that has led to misleading interpretations. In chapter three Hadot also reminds us that many ancient texts have a relation to an oral tradition that contemporary scholarship often overlooks. This is particularly true for the scholarship on Plato and Aristotle; if contemporary scholars were more attentive in taking into account the relation to the oral tradition of the texts of Plato and Aristotle, our understanding of these authors would be enhanced. Chapter four directly addresses a fundamental hermeneutical problem: is it possible to interpret a text objectively or is a scholar irremediably influenced by his own interests, mind-set, and goals? Hadot provides a fairly optimistic view according to which, although complete objectivity is only an ideal, a scholar should and can aim to adopt a rigorous exegetical method that will allow him to reach a high degree of objectivity. Hadot's discussion of this issue might disappoint many readers; he seems, indeed, to dismiss too quickly a problem which deserves more serious consideration. Nonetheless, if we locate Hadot in the context of French scholarship we may surmise that his position is more a reaction to the extreme views of some of the followers of Gadamer rather than a fully worked out thesis on the issue. At a closer look, however, Hadot's approach towards

ancient texts contains a serious philosophical problem that needs to be mentioned. Hadot seems to believe that the meaning of a text can be completely reduced to what the author intended to say. The problem with this position is that it overlooks the awareness that the strength of influential works consists in their ability to transcend their authors and their historical contexts. It is by virtue of this strength that classical texts have been reinterpreted in such unexpected ways by Humanists.

Chapters five, six, and seven discuss from different perspectives Hadot's original interpretation of ancient philosophy as a way of life. Hadot uses this expression to indicate that in the classical world philosophy was not merely a theoretical enterprise but was also an activity that was intended to lead human beings to transform the way they live and how they regard their existence. Chapter five focuses on mysticism. Hadot recalls his studies on Neoplatonism and explains that according to Plotinus, philosophy, understood both as a theoretical enterprise and a way of life, prepares us for mystical experience. Hadot emphasizes that Plotinus's mysticism is only one among many different types of mystical experiences. Though mystical experience is universal, the way it is described and understood depends on different historical and cultural mind-sets. Hadot shows that, although different thinkers and philosophical traditions (Neoplatonism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, Wittgenstein) disagree in the analysis of the mystical experience, they concur in recognizing its significance for man's discovery of his "true self."

Chapters six and seven continue the discussion of Hadot's idea that in antiquity philosophy was a way of life. He employs the insightful Stoic distinction between "philosophical discourse" and "philosophy," with philosophical discourse being an abstract intellectual enterprise, whereas "philosophy" is the "effective, concrete, lived" (94) practice of philosophical doctrines. He views both philosophical discourse and "philosophy" both as being necessary for a philosopher, with the latter having a predominant role over the former. According to Hadot's interpretation, the understanding of philosophy as a way of life led ancient philosophers to develop a series of practices that he calls "spiritual exercises." Hadot, however, is not the first to use the expression "spiritual exercises"; he borrowed it from Christian spirituality and, more precisely, from St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, who popularized this expression. *Spiritual Exercises* is the title of the book written by St. Ignatius that outlines a program of meditations, prayers, and mental exercises designed to help men to recognize the role of God's will in their lives. Hadot adopts the expression "spiritual exercise" with some degree of freedom since he regards ancient "spiritual exercise" as practices designed to "bring about a transformation of the individual," (87) though not necessarily in a religious sense. Ancient spiritual exercises varied significantly; some were purely theoretical (reading, discussing, writing philosophical texts), others spiritual (meditations), yet others corporeal (dietary regimes, respiratory techniques). Despite what some scholars suggest, Hadot is right in holding that the expression "spiritual exercises" is the most suitable for capturing the variety of these practices. What a reader might find problematic is not the expression used by Hadot but his discussions of ancient spiritual exercises. Although he argues that in Antiquity spiritual exercises were a series of very diverse practices, when he actually discusses them he mainly focuses on purely theoretical exercises. Hadot gives the impression that the transformation required to lead a philosophical life is a purely theoretical enterprise, i.e., a relentless and continuous rational investigation. This

impression is furthered by Hadot's recurrent example of the emperor-philosopher Marcus Aurelius, who wrote the *Meditations* in order to constantly remind himself how to live according to Stoic principles. Nevertheless, if we consider what motivates Hadot to choose the expression "spiritual exercises," it appears that he probably thinks that the transformation that allows a man to lead a philosophical life requires theoretical as well as non-theoretical spiritual exercises. It is, however, disappointing that Hadot tells us so little about non-theoretical spiritual exercises. A discussion of the relation between theoretical and non-theoretical spiritual exercises would have been enlightening and useful.

Hadot's discussions of the status of philosophy in antiquity in chapters five, six, and seven have the merit of making the reader aware that in the Greco-Roman world philosophy was regarded in a way that has very little in common with the one predominant today, viz., as an exclusively academic discipline. In the discussion in chapters five, six, and seven Hadot contrasts the contemporary way of regarding philosophy with that of the Greco-Roman world. Surprisingly, he fails to indicate the important conclusion we reach if we follow his argument historically: philosophy, like all other disciplines (e.g., medicine, law, engineering, etc.) was developed as an attempt to address some special needs, such as to live happily, to come to terms with human suffering, and to find meaning in human existence. Thus, the problem with the contemporary understanding of philosophy as only an academic discipline is that it completely divorces the discipline from the purposes for which it was developed.

In the final pages of chapter seven Hadot, using the conflict between Humanists and Scholastics to support his view, (115) argues that since the Middle Ages there has been an ongoing conflict between thinkers who regard philosophy as a way of life and those who consider it as a purely academic discipline. This historical claim, however, needs to be reconsidered. It is true, as Hadot suggests, that there have been philosophers (like the Scholastics) who were accused by their contemporaries of forgetting that philosophy cannot be reduced to a purely academic discipline, but it is also true that these philosophers would not have accepted that type of criticism. The consideration of philosophy as the "handmaiden" of theology did not mean that the practice of philosophy had no existential value for the Scholastics. Thomas Aquinas, for example, emphasized the importance of the study of philosophy for reaching the beatific vision. The divorce of philosophy from its existential dimension seems to be a specific feature of our time, as many of today's philosophers find it difficult to accept that philosophy can be regarded as a way of life. It is in light of this attitude of many contemporary philosophers that *The Present Alone is Our Happiness* makes such a significant contribution to the contemporary debate on the status of philosophy.

Hadot's influential thesis that ancient philosophy was ultimately a way of life is not only convincing and well-argued but also historically sound. There is, however, one additional historical issue that needs to be mentioned. Although Hadot is right to claim that in antiquity philosophy was mostly regarded as a way of life, he seems not to realize that in ancient philosophy the relation between "philosophy" and philosophical discourse was more complicated than he suggests. As Michael Frede has shown in an excellent article, in ancient philosophy it is possible to distinguish different ways of understanding the relation between

“philosophy” and philosophical discourse.¹ The so-called “Presocratics” and, more specifically, the Milesians regarded philosophy as a predominantly theoretical enterprise which has, nonetheless, the practical purpose of understanding the world around us in order to alter it. It is only with Socrates that philosophy became more overtly a way of life. Nonetheless, Socrates’ extreme intellectualism – according to which there are, objectively, such things as *the just, the pious, etc.*, that can be rationally discovered – still gives priority to philosophical discourse over “philosophy.” Once knowledge of the virtues is attained, leading a certain way of life is an inevitable consequence. Plato as well seems to consider philosophical discourse prior to “philosophy” since he believes that knowledge of the forms constitutes both the condition sine qua non and the reason for conducting a philosophical life. It is only with the Hellenistic schools and, even more so, with the development of Roman Imperial Schools, that the priority of philosophical theory over “philosophy” turns decisively in favor of the latter.

In the first part of chapter eight Hadot offers a brief but fascinating analysis of the way the figure of Socrates has been understood by some major philosophers throughout history. Hadot shows convincingly that every age had its own understanding of Socrates – i.e., in different times in history the figure of Socrates evoked different meanings and interpretations. In the second part of the chapter, Hadot examines how Socrates’ idea that philosophy is, ultimately, a way of life has been understood by contemporary thinkers. Hadot shows appreciation of the Existentialists’ idea that philosophical investigation should lead us to “learn to see the world again.” (131) He disagrees, however, with those Existentialists who argue that once we see the world in a new light, we realize its absurdity, with such a realization creating a sense of “nausea.” Hadot contrasts the Existentialists’ conclusion with that of the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* who claims that the experience of seeing the world in a new light leads not to nausea but to a sense of “wonder in front of the fact that the world exists.” (133) In the final pages of chapter eight Hadot reflects on the relations between his view of the Graeco-Roman world and that of Foucault. Hadot notes that, although he disagrees with Foucault concerning the method of studying ancient philosophy and the understanding of the Graeco-Roman notion of pleasure, his notion of philosophy as a way of life is closely related to Foucault’s idea of philosophy as the practice of “care of the self.”

In chapter nine Hadot addresses the fascinating question of whether the teachings of the ancient philosophers can still provide guidance for us today. He notes that the difficulties an ordinary man of the twenty-first century has in following the teachings of ancient philosophers are no different from those of men who lived in the Graeco-Roman world. Hadot indicates that the main difficulty involved in leading a philosophical life consists in overcoming the attachment to so-called “external goods” (wealth, power, fame, love of family and friends, etc.) that most societies throughout history have regarded as the requirements for a happy life. He believes, however, that the philosophical ideal of the sage, who is completely detached from “the world,” serves as an ideal that is unattainable for ordinary people. Ordinary people should content themselves with merely aspiring to be like the sage.

In the concluding chapter, from which the book takes its title, Hadot advocates the view,

¹ Michael Frede, “The Philosopher,” in Jacques Brunschwig and Geoffrey Ernest Lloyd (eds.), *Greek Thought: A Guide to Classical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2000, 3-19.

common to many thinkers from the Stoics to Goethe, that it is only by focusing on the present that men can be happy. Human beings are constantly torn between memory of the past and projections of the future and do not “know how to recognize the infinite value of every moment.” (165) The view Hadot advocates, though it rightly emphasizes that each moment of our life is unique and must be valued, nevertheless presents a difficulty. Human history shows that great cultural, social, and political advancements have often been the result of the dedication of individuals who constantly “lived in the future” and who focused their energies on a world to come, which they often did not live to see. Hadot does note that the concentration on the present should not result in oblivion of the future, but he does not seem to fully appreciate the complexity of combining these two different attitudes towards life.

The Present Alone is Our Happiness is an enriching book that forces us to question our fixed beliefs about the status of philosophy and the attitudes people ordinarily have towards life. The method Hadot employs, i.e., presenting his views not directly but through the views and words of ancient philosophers, results in a text of depth and sophistication.

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