



REVIEW

Pierre Hadot, *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot: Philosophy as Practice*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020. Pp. 320. ISBN: 9781474272971 (hardback).

What do philosophers do? For the French philosopher and historian Pierre Hadot (1922-2010), philosophy is an exercise. Philosophers exercise themselves. They exercise for the transformation of their souls in pursuit of beatitude, wisdom, and peace. Hadot developed this understanding through a comprehensive approach to ancient philosophy that pays attention to the philosophical practices of authors like Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, attending not only to their treatises on philosophy but also to their other activities. Teaching, meditation, and lifestyle take on an essential role in their practice of philosophy. As this new publication shows, it is by shifting the emphasis from thinking as the construction of systematic or abstract knowledge to non-discursive philosophical exercises that Hadot was able to produce the image of philosophy as a way of life."

The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot: Philosophy as Practice, translated by Matthew Sharpe and Federico Testa, compiles 14 texts that had never-before been translated into English. This publication serves both as an introduction to Hadot's work as well as a valuable complement to those already acquainted with it. It is intended as a response to the ever-widening reception of his work in the anglosphere; the rise of scholarly attention to his work, principally for its influence on the philosopher and public intellectual Michel Foucault, and, as Matthew Sharpe points out in his introduction to the volume, also for its criticisms from "analytic" philosophers and scholars. Moreover, Hadot's engagement with ancient philosophy resonates with the resurgence of public interest in Stoicism and personal development. It is with those conversations in mind that the translators selected the texts for the volume.

The 14 chapters are split into 5 parts that progress from the introduction and exposition of Hadot's framework and key concepts to more particular engagements with specific notions and debates. This development, which does not follow the chronological order of the original publications, has the pedagogical benefit of progressively leading the reader into Hadot's thought while guiding readers with more specific interests. After having presented each part, I will reflect on the current challenges that Hadot raises for contemporary philosophical and theoretical issues for critical engagement in ways of life."

The first part, titled "Key Parameters," is composed of four pieces that provide very useful entry points into Hadot's methodology and concerns. Serving more as an introduction, those texts show the two essential moves made by Hadot. The first one is the move away from the modern conception of philosophy as argument towards the ancient practice of spiritual exercise. This shift has important consequences for the meaning of philosophy itself and its relation to political and religious contexts. The second move consists of the inclusion of non-discursive activity as part of the practice of ancient philosophers. For example, Hadot exposes, in the piece "My Books and my Research," the influence that Wittgenstein had on him with his notion that signification depends on and is informed by a community of speakers and a form of life (i.e., the language game). It is through this important encounter that Hadot changed his approach to ancient texts. For him, language is not a translation of thoughts but "an effort to modify and transform the self" (34). Hence, this effort is enmeshed in a cultural and social context. The article "The Oral Teaching of Plato" makes the case for the importance of oral teaching in the philosophical practice of philosophers. In doing so, Hadot promotes the effective and transformative goal of this philosophical activity, a practice that was erased by the exegetic and text-centric mode of philosophizing of the modern era.

The following three chapters that comprise the second part, "Aspects," present three features of Hadot's conception of ancient philosophy. This part is of particular interest since it presents a deeper engagement with the constitution of philosophy as a discipline and also an anticipation of later criticisms by analytical scholars such as Martha Nussbaum, Brad Inwood, and John M. Cooper. Chapter 5 focuses on how the spiritual 'conversion' to a philosophical school differs from the evangelical form of conversion. The next one gives us a survey of the way philosophy was divided in antiquity. Hadot shows that debates on the theoretical and hierarchical divisions also corresponded to expository strategies and pedagogical concerns. In Chapter 7, Hadot highlights the status of dialectic and rhetoric in the classical and imperial periods as constitutive parts of the logical and pedagogical training. Consequently, the "rigorous rational argumentation" of dialectic, instead of being devalued, played an important role in the process of philosophical conversion. Thus, the three pieces in this section explore and expose the constitutive rationality of what Hadot calls "spiritual exercises." In contrast to religious and mystical experiences, the philosophical transformation of the soul is the result of a pedagogical process of argumentation and self-reflexivity.

The next two chapters constitute the section on "Nature." This part introduces an often-neglected aspect of Hadot's work: his research on the western understanding of Nature. As Matthew Sharpe indicates in his introduction, Chapter 8, "Ancient Man and Nature," serves as an introduction to Hadot's distinction regarding two attitudes towards nature that would be later developed in Hadot's book on the topic called "Le Voile d Isis." In response to the attitude that conquers and seizes nature for Man's benefit, Hadot exposes the more respectful alternative of "living according to nature." Chapter 9, a brief but highly compelling meditation on travel in antiquity, contrasts the geographical movement of ancient pilgrimages with the "turn inward" promoted by philosophy, "to change

the soul, rather than the place," as Hadot puts it. By acquiring the ability to see Man's position and participation in Nature's whole, Platonists and Stoics acquired a sense of cosmic belonging and admiration that filled the need for pilgrimage and mystic experiences.

The extensive part four, called "Figures," gathers together three chapters that will be most useful for readers interested in contemporary thought and debates. Chapter 10 focuses on the figure of the sage and argues for its central role in the constitution of ancient philosophy. More than a conceptual persona, Hadot argues, the figure of the sage becomes a role model for philosophers who were obliged to think, act and even feel according to this model. The philosopher is the one who sets his mind, body, and soul on the horizon of wisdom. Correlatively, chapter 11 shows how the meditations of Marcus Aurelius should be understood not as pessimistic lamentation but rather as "spiritual exercises." Introducing this important notion in this chapter, Hadot situates the Emperor's writing in the lineage of the Stoic practice of "indifference" toward the physical world and its chain of causes. A form of detachment from what the individual cannot control that invites to consider the perennial organization of nature over the temporal fragility of human affairs. In this vein, chapter 12 addresses the notion of "culture of the self" as an "aesthetic of existence" developed by Foucault. Contrary to the author of *The Hermeneutics of the Self*, Hadot insists on the moral and transformative aspect of the practice of philosophy. For him, it is the "good" and not "beauty" that acts as the guiding star of the life and practice of ancient philosophers.

The last part includes two essays on the notions of "Ends." Chapter 13 proposes a detailed historical survey of the decline of philosophical schools. By situating the "End of Paganism" in the larger political, psychological, theological, and philosophical context, Hadot explains the rise of superstitions in the later ancient world. Instead of a coalescence of philosophy with revealed religion or theurgy through the Christian doctrine, Hadot underscores how suprarational dimensions gained importance in later philosophy. The closing chapter relies on the other meaning of the word "end" as a goal. Presenting the notion of happiness in competing philosophical schools, Hadot shows how the ancient practice of self-cultivation was less an egoistic enterprise than one oriented toward justice and benevolence. Most importantly, Hadot stresses that the goal of philosophical practice is to overcome the ego to reach the greatness of the soul that characterizes the sage.

This careful translation takes on important tasks. In addition to highlighting the multiple facets of Hadot's work, the critical apparatus rigorously provides important terminological nuances that might have been lost in translation otherwise. Even though the abundance of translator's notes affects the design of the book and is often redundant with the translator's preface, this volume will serve as a reference and an example for the later translation of Hadot's work. It also contributes immensely to the debate regarding the distinction between "spiritual exercises" and Foucault's "technologies of the self." The pieces of evidence gleaned in chapters 3, 5, 6, and 7 illustrate the specificity of Hadot's notion, distinguishing it at the same time from Foucault's "aesthetics of existence" and existentialism. Through this, there emerges a different account of the notion self in which

individuality and self-centrism is overcome through a “superior self” resulting from the practice of philosophy as self-transformation.

Besides that, I cannot help but note that this publication resonates with a certain valorization of the self in theoretical and critical reflections, especially in the American context, developed in recent years by feminist, queer, and black writers and artists, notably under the influence of Foucault. The affinity of Hadot’s “philosophy as practice” with cultural criticism and what has been called “Autotheory” highlights its relevance and necessity for ongoing public conversations and scholarly debates outside the discipline of philosophy. Even though feminist and queer thinkers and writers like Paul B. Preciado, Audre Lorde, Maggie Nelson, or Adrian Piper would reject the model of wisdom and the figure of the sage, their insistence on thinking the self from its inextricable position in moral, social, and political issues should be put in dialogue with Hadot’s shift to philosophy as “a way of life.” Rather than dissociating philosophy from those trends, I believe Hadot allows for a productive dialogue between the history of the discipline and emerging modes of theory and self-cultivation.

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