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Philosophical Inquiry as Spiritual Exercise:
Ancient and Modern Perspectives

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Thursday, April 19, 2018

Pierre Hadot on Philosophy as a Way of Life

– Pierre Hadot (1922–2010) was a French philosopher and historian of ancient philosophy, especially of Plato and Aristotle and Stoicism, Cynicism, Epicureanism, and Neoplatonism. He was a professor at the Collège de France in Paris where he also wrote and taught on Marcus Aurelius, Plotinus, Descartes, Kant, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, and others. I'm drawing from two of his translated works, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* and the collection of essays found in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. The central question in both these texts is largely the same.

– What does it mean that philosophy is a way of life? For Hadot the answer is simple. Philosophy, when done right, involves our whole being. It means paying attention to our theoretical and intellectual beliefs, but it also means attending to our values, feelings, and practices. It requires that we pay attention to ourselves and develop a concern for those around us, for the other people in our lives and communities. It's a whole form of life.

– Philosophy for Hadot is an existential choice in our mode of living. It's a choice of life but also a way of making a life. In this sense, philosophy is a kind of a self-making that issues from our choice of practice. This is why Hadot argues that philosophical discourse must be understood from the perspective of the way of life of which it is both the expression and the means. Both the

expression and the means, both theory and practice conjoined: This is the key to entering Hadot's reading of philosophy, and perhaps to entering the philosophical life for one's own self.

– Whatever else we might say about theory and practice, Hadot argues, philosophy is first and foremost a question of self-transformation. And beyond a question of transformation, it is an admission, an admission that we do not know from the beginning who we are or where we are going or how we ought to act. Philosophy at the start, then, is a question, not a question about how to recite this or that theoretical position, but of being able to place ourselves in question. This is one of Hadot's central arguments. Philosophy is about attending to one's own self. It's a mode of self-examination, a practice of placing ourselves in question.

– Hadot writes, "The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a conversion which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it. It raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom" (283).

The Figure of Socrates

– One of Hadot's primary examples of the philosopher is the figure Socrates (by which he means the character of Socrates who comes down to us through various texts, including Plato's): "In other words, by passing from knowledge to himself, [Socrates] will begin to place himself in question" (28). "The point was thus not so much to question the apparent knowledge we think we have, as to question *ourselves* and the values which guide our own lives" (28). This is a

questioning that sets the person at a distance from themselves (29). “The real problem is therefore not the problem of knowing this or that, but of *being* in this or that way” (29).

– This is how Hadot suggests that we think of philosophy, as a series of exercises engaged for the transformation of our being and perception. Philosophy, he suggests, is more about forming than informing. It’s about achieving what he calls a “mutation of vision” (*What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 231) or a “conversion of attention” (*Plotinus*, 6), the insight being that perception—or how we sense, feel, and understand the world—is itself a kind of practice. In other words, on Hadot’s account, attention involves work and effort. It’s a trainable skill.

Philosophical Exercises

– Now, it’s important to understand that we should take Hadot literally on the point of perception and training. Hadot writes, “The notion of philosophical exercises has its roots in the ideal of athleticism and in the habitual practice of physical culture typical of the gymnasia. Just as the athlete gave new strength and form to his body by means of repeated bodily exercises, so the philosopher developed his strength of soul by means of philosophical exercises, and transformed himself” (*What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 189).

– Here’s Hadot making the same point again: “Underlying this conviction [that people can modify, transform, and realize themselves] is the parallelism between physical and spiritual exercises: just as, by dint of repeated physical exercises, athletes give new form and strength to their bodies, so the philosopher develops his strength of soul, modifies his inner climate, transforms his vision of the world, and, finally, his entire being. The analogy seems all the more

self-evident in that the *gymnasium*, the place where physical exercises were practiced, was the same place where philosophy lessons were given; in other words, it was also the place for training in *spiritual gymnastics*” (102).

– The philosopher in this sense is a contemplative athlete. But an athlete of what, exactly, we might ask? Michel Foucault writes that “the ancient athlete is an athlete of the event” (*Hermeneutics*, 322), which is to say an athlete responsive to the unforeseeable conditions of life. Foucault writes, “The good athlete’s training, then, must be training in some elementary moves which are sufficiently general and effective for them to be adapted to every circumstance and—on condition of their being sufficiently simple and well-learned—for one to be able to make immediate use of them when the need arises” (*Hermeneutics*, 321).

Askēsis

– What are these elementary moves? What are these precursors of philosophical ability? The central concept I want to introduce here is *askēsis*, a word that you may recognize as closely related to terms like *ascetic* or *ascetism*, which are both connected to notions of abstinence or sometimes to a kind of severe self discipline, but I want to follow Hadot in giving this term a more general definition, before describing a specific kind of *askēsis*.

– *Askēsis* for our purposes will refer to any intentional practice that produces a transformation in the person. This includes practices of diet, sleep, meditation, physical training, study, or therapy, and so on. When it comes to philosophy in particular, though, Hadot identifies a particular kind of practice as central to achieving philosophical insight. We can call this practice an *askēsis* of

the “I”—of the self developing a relation to itself. This relation, says Hadot, “constitutes the foundation of every spiritual exercise” (*What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 9).

– Hadot cites as evidence for this claim that “All these schools [Platonism, Neopythagoreanism, Cynicism, Stoicism, Pyrrhonism, Epicureanism] called for a kind of self-duplication in which the ‘I’ refuses to be conflated with its desires and appetites, takes up a distance from the objects of its desires, and becomes aware of its power to be detached from them” (*What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 190).

***Askēsis* of the “I”: Sensing That One Senses**

– In simple terms, this *askēsis* of the “I” means becoming aware that you are a self—or at least that you very much seem to be a self moving through the world, with a present, a past, and a future, one full of worries and doubts and expectations and desires (191). *Askēsis* is in this sense a turning of attention onto itself. It is an attention to oneself as a self, a sensing *that* one senses (195). Hadot continues, writing that these “spiritual exercises almost always correspond to the movement by which the ‘I’ concentrates itself upon itself and discovers that it is not what it had thought. It ceases to be conflated with the objects to which it had become attached” (190).

– No sooner than we begin to practice and pay attention to this “I,” Hadot says, do we start to exercise the death of this “I.” In this sense, the split of the self to itself suggests that we begin to die the death of this first self—the one who’s constantly being pulled in this way and that by desires and appearances and unexamined assumptions about the way things are. First philosophy

in this context is thus not metaphysics or aesthetics or ethics or epistemology but practice, a practice of an “I” learning to die. Philosophy is learning to die, as the famous saying goes.

– But what happens after death? If philosophy is learning to die, it’s also about learning to live in the after life. If you’ve made the philosophical jump, then welcome, you’re here with the rest of us in some kind of second life. As it turns out, once you die in this philosophical sense, a lot of things keep on happening, and these happenings are the arena within which what we normally think of as *doing* philosophy begins. The emphasis on practice is essential here: This second life doesn’t open up once and for all, but only insofar as our practices allow us to remember the conditions of our existence—or, rather, to remember the conditions of our own conditioning.

Dialectics

– Okay, so far this all sounds like a lot of individual, isolated introspection, but this isn’t the end of the story. This *askēsis* of the “I” is closely related to what many of you will be familiar with as a kind of Platonic dialectics—a dialectics of the self in relation to itself. But again, this isn’t merely thought in relation to thought, but a full being relating to itself as a full being, and in relating to our self we begin to understand the demands required in relating to another person.

– We see here a dual *askēsis*—that of the individual with him or herself, and that between two or more individuals. Philosophy requires both practices, the one lending strength to the other in a kind of reciprocal causality. Thus for Plato, philosophy is a dialogue, an inner and outer dialogue where discourse and contemplation share a similar dialectical structure, and where the point of

carrying out a conversation is to achieve a certain kind of transcendence over oneself. The dialogue is another exercise of dying before one's beliefs (68).

– “That is why Platonic dialectics was not purely a logical exercise. Instead, it was a spiritual exercise which demanded that the interlocutors undergo an *askēsis*, or self-transformation. It was not a matter of combat between two individuals, in which the more skillful person imposed his point of view, but a joint effort on the part of two interlocutors in accord with the rational demands of reasonable discourse, or the *logos*” (*What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 62–63)

Care for Others and the City

– For Hadot, learning to die through philosophy is a spiritual exercise. It is “a tearing away from everyday life. It is a conversion, a total transformation of one's vision, lifestyle, and behavior” (*Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 103). To exemplify this conversion, this tearing away from everyday life, Hadot again turns to the figure of Socrates. For Socrates is set apart not only from his own sense of self—the achievement of self-duplication in the first *askēsis*—nor only from his interlocutors—the achievement of the dialectic in the second *askēsis*—but also from his fellow Athenians in general. Socrates lives in a different kind of space, as a different kind of creature.

– Hadot writes of Socrates, “He is *atopos*, meaning strange, extravagant, absurd, unclassifiable, disturbing” (30) and that “he is not at home in either the world of senseless people or the world of the sages; neither wholly in the world of men and women, nor wholly in the world of gods” (47). He is an intermediary and a mediator (47). Socrates is a *daimōn* a “mixture of divinity and humanity” (49). Socrates lives in the spaces between transcendence and immanence.

– “Socrates is simultaneously in the world and outside of it” (38), and “he transcends both people and things by his moral demands and the engagement they require; yet he is involved with people and with things because the only true philosophy lies in the everyday” (38). Socrates the intermediary is both in the city and outside of it (36–37), and he is concerned for his fellow citizens. “Care for the self is thus, indissolubly, care for the city and care for others” (37–38).

– Hadot uses the term “redescension” to describe this ferrying back forth between the everyday world and the world the philosopher inhabits, the in-between world where habits, customs, and representations can be re-evaluated and re-fashioned in the direction of the Good, the Virtuous. Socrates transcends the world of customs, habits, and laws and redescends into the city to share his practices, his questions, his *askēsis*.

Knowledge and Care of the Self

– *Askēsis* is a practice of the “I,” of the dialectic, and of responsibility to the city. *Askēsis* is a first philosophy, an integration of ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology in the first person.

– In this way, *askēsis* is about both knowledge and care. It has a therapeutic potential that Foucault marks as a shift away from knowledge of the self (*gnothi seauton*) and towards care of the self (*epimeleia heautou*), a moment within which we can choose to construct experience differently, to intervene in the representations that inform our experience of the world, allowing us to soften the otherwise strong grip the unexamined flow of representations, beliefs, and habits has upon us and our communities. But *askēsis* is more than just moral pragmatism.

– Foucault: “*Askēsis* is not and basically never was the effect of obedience to an authority like the law. In reality, *askēsis* is a practice of truth. *Ascesis* is not a way of subjecting the subject to the law; it is a way of binding him to the truth” (*Hermeneutics*, 317). Here Foucault links *askēsis* with a certain conception of truth, or a practice of truth-saying, known as *parrhesia*. The philosopher is a *parrhesiast*, a subject who risks themselves to speak the truth (Socrates, again).

– This *askēsis* must become a habit, the habit of evaluating the ongoing stream of representations as they arise in experience. It is the work of the dialectic to confront the representation and evaluate its adequacy to the event at hand. This work aims to create new and better representations, and more importantly, to create new possibilities for freedom within experience. Philosophy, then, is a question of taking care of our own souls so that we can in turn take care of one another and our city. Philosophy is the conversion of possibility into experience.