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Spiritual Exercises and Ancient Philosophy: An Introduction to Pierre Hadot

Arnold I. Davidson

Pierre Hadot, whose inaugural lecture to the chair of the History of Hellenistic and Roman Thought at the Collège de France we are publishing here, is one of the most significant and wide-ranging historians of ancient philosophy writing today. His work, hardly known in the English-reading world except among specialists, exhibits that rare combination of prodigious historical scholarship and rigorous philosophical argumentation that upsets any preconceived distinction between the history of philosophy and philosophy proper. In addition to being the translator and author of monographs on Plotinus, Victorinus, Porphyry, and many others, Hadot's most important general philosophical work is entitled *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*.¹ Combined with detailed studies of Socrates and Marcus Aurelius, this work presents a history of spiritual exercises from Socrates to early Christianity, an account of their decline in modern philosophy, and a discussion of the different conceptions of philosophy that have accompanied the trajectory and fate of the theory and practice of spiritual exercises. Hadot's "Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy" provides an overview of his major themes and preoccupations, and gives some indication of the historical scope of his work. This lecture also illuminates the methodological problems one faces in studying the history of thought, especially problems concerning the

1. See Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 2d ed. (Paris, 1987); hereafter abbreviated *ES*; all translations are my own. A shorter, first edition of this book was published in 1981.

evolution, reinterpretation, and even misunderstanding of the meaning and significance of philosophical terminology. In this brief introduction, I can do no more than attempt to provide a context for Hadot's inaugural lecture, by way of summary of his major work, and, more specifically for readers of *Critical Inquiry*, to sketch the profound importance that Hadot's writings had for the last works of Michel Foucault.

Hadot's focus on the notion of spiritual exercises in ancient philosophy is meant to emphasize, in the first place, that in the ancient schools of thought philosophy was a way of life. Philosophy presented itself as a "mode of life, as an act of living, as a way of being" (*ES*, p. 221). The lesson of ancient philosophy consisted in "an invitation for each man to transform himself. Philosophy is conversion, transformation of the way of being and the way of living, the quest for wisdom" (*ES*, p. 227). Philosophy, so understood to be a form of life, required exercises that were neither simply exercises of thought nor even moral exercises, but rather, in the full sense of this term, *spiritual* exercises. Since they aimed at realizing a transformation of one's vision of the world and a metamorphosis of one's personality, these exercises had an existential value, not only a moral one. They did not attempt only to insure behavior in accordance with a code of good conduct but involved all aspects of one's being—intellect, imagination, sensibility, and will (see *ES*, pp. 13–15, 59–61). Spiritual exercises were thus exercises in learning how to live the philosophical life.

The figure of Socrates provides Hadot with the first clear illustration of the practice of spiritual exercises. A master of dialogue with others and of dialogue with himself, Socrates should be seen as a master of this practice of spiritual exercises. According to Hadot, a Socratic dialogue is a spiritual exercise practised in common, and it incites one to give attention to oneself, to take care of oneself, through inner spiritual exercises. The Socratic maxim "know thyself" requires a relationship of the self to itself that "constitutes the basis of all spiritual exercise" (*ES*, p. 31). Every spiritual exercise is "dialogical" insofar as it is an "exercise of authentic presence," of the self to itself and of the self to others (*ES*, p. 34). Hadot quotes Victor Goldschmidt's remark, characterizing Platonic dialogues, that "'the dialogue intends to form more than to inform,'" to form the interlocutor and reader so as to lead him

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to conversion, to a transformation of his way of life (*ES*, pp. 35–36). In these Socratic and Platonic dialogues, what is most important is not the solution to a particular problem but the path traversed in arriving at this solution (*ES*, p. 35). Hence, we understand the crucial significance of the dimension of the interlocutor. This essential dimension

prevents the dialogue from being a theoretical and dogmatic account and forces it to be a concrete and practical exercise, because, to be precise, it is not concerned with the exposition of a doctrine, but with guiding an interlocutor to a certain settled mental attitude: it is a combat, amicable but real. We should note that this is what takes place in every spiritual exercise; it is necessary to make oneself change one's own point of view, attitude, set of convictions, therefore to dialogue with oneself, therefore to struggle with oneself. [*ES*, p. 34]

Hadot proceeds to show, in great detail, the central role of this spiritual combat with oneself, aimed at a total transformation of one's way of being, in both Stoicism and Epicureanism. For both of these philosophical schools, the principal cause of human suffering is the passions, for example, disorderly desires and exaggerated fears; and, therefore, philosophy is, in the first place, a therapeutics for the passions (*ES*, pp. 16–17). In Stoicism, the fundamental spiritual attitude is that of attention (*prosochè*), which is a “continual vigilance . . . an always alert consciousness of oneself, a constant tension of spirit” (*ES*, p. 19). This vigilance allows the Stoic to keep the fundamental rule of life—the distinction between that which depends on us and that which does not depend on us—always ready to hand (*procheiron*). Stoic exercises of memorization and meditation are intended to insure that all of the events of one's life are viewed in the light of this attention to, this spiritual concentration on, the fundamental rule, which, as a result, will deliver us from the passions that do not depend on us. This accounts for the Stoic attention to the present moment, to his transformed attitude to the past and the future, which are not within our control.² Epicureanism also gives a very large place to the practice of spiritual exercises. But for the Epicurean, the therapeutics of the soul consists in “bringing the soul back from the worries of life to the simple joy of existing” (*ES*, p. 25). Along with exercises of meditation similar to those in Stoicism, the Epicurean must exercise, not the continual tension and vigilance of the Stoic, but a form of relaxation that detaches his thought from the vision of painful things and fixes his attention on

2. For a detailed discussion of the significance of the present moment in Stoic and Epicurean thought, as well as in Goethe, see Hadot, “‘The Present Alone Is Our Joy’: The Meaning of the Present Instant in Goethe and in Ancient Philosophy,” *Diogenes*, no. 133 (1986): 60–82.

pleasures. He must make “a deliberate choice, always renewed, for relaxation and serenity and for a profound gratitude towards nature and life, which, if we know how to find it, offers us unceasing pleasure and joy” (*ES*, p. 28). In Epicureanism, this pleasure itself is a spiritual exercise. According to Hadot, Stoicism and Epicureanism can be taken to correspond to two opposed, but inseparable, poles of our inner life—“tension and relaxation, duty and serenity, moral consciousness and the joy of existing” (*ES*, p. 57; see also p. 225). In antiquity, true philosophy is a spiritual exercise, and philosophical theories, either explicitly or implicitly, are placed in the service of a spiritual practice that expresses a particular existential attitude (*ES*, pp. 51–52). The plurality of ancient schools allows us to compare the consequences of different possible fundamental rational attitudes (see *ES*, p. 225).

Throughout his studies, Hadot emphasizes further that, beginning with Plato, philosophy is also represented as an exercise and training for death. In the conflict between the universal rationality of the Logos and the changing appetites of the corporeal individual, the person who remains faithful to the Logos risks losing his life. The story of Socrates, writes Hadot, is one of death through fidelity to the immutable norms of the Logos (see *ES*, p. 37). Tracing this theme of the presentation of philosophy as an “exercise for death” through Stoicism, Epicureanism, Plotinus, Neoplatonism, and early Christianity, Hadot shows that each philosophy, in its own way, linked this exercise to “the contemplation of the totality, to the elevation of thought, passing from individual and impassioned subjectivity to the objectivity of the universal perspective, that is to say, to the exercise of pure thought” (*ES*, pp. 41–42). It is in this perspective, moreover, that one must place ancient physics, itself a spiritual exercise that allowed one to see the human world “from above” (see *ES*, pp. 42–44).³ Hadot concludes that “all of the contemplative and speculative work of the philosopher thus becomes a spiritual exercise in the degree to which, elevating thought to the perspective of the Whole, it liberates it from the illusions of individuality” (*ES*, p. 42).

The spiritual progress of philosophy towards wisdom brings about tranquility of the soul, self-sufficiency, and cosmic consciousness. These three essential aspects of the philosophical way of life all require the practice of spiritual exercises of self-transformation in order to be attained. Tranquility of the soul (*ataraxia*) results from the philosophical therapeutics intended to cure anxiety; self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*), the state in which the self depends only on itself, demands a methodical transformation of oneself; cosmic consciousness is a kind of spiritual

3. For further development of this theme, see Hadot, “Histoire de la pensée hellénistique et romaine: La physique comme exercice spirituel et le regard d'en haut,” in *Annuaire du Collège de France, 1987–1988: Résumé des cours et travaux* (Paris, 1988), pp. 401–5.

surpassing of oneself that requires a consciousness of being part of the cosmic whole (see *ES*, pp. 218–19, 231). Hadot repeatedly reminds us that each of these three goals is part of the philosophical way of life; they are not merely the objects of philosophical speculation and theory but must be exhibited directly in one's very mode of being. Hadot insists on the distinction, formulated by the Stoics but admitted implicitly by the majority of philosophers, between philosophical discourse (or the discourse on philosophy) and philosophy itself:

According to the Stoics, the parts of philosophy, that is to say, physics, ethics, and logic, were in fact not the parts of philosophy itself, but the parts of philosophical discourse. They meant by that that, since it was a question of teaching philosophy, it was necessary to propose a theory of logic, a theory of physics, a theory of ethics. The requirements of discourse, both logical and pedagogical, obliged one to make these distinctions. But philosophy itself, that is to say, the mode of philosophical life is no longer a theory divided into parts, but a unique act that consists in *living* logic, physics, and ethics. One no longer then produces the theory of logic, that is, of speaking and of thinking properly, but one thinks and speaks properly; one no longer produces the theory of the physical world, but one contemplates the cosmos; one no longer produces the theory of moral action, but one acts in a virtuous and just manner. [*ES*, pp. 219–20]

Hadot, furthermore, traces the reduction of philosophy to philosophical discourse beginning in the Middle Ages. He argues that, apart from the monastic use of the word *philosophia*, during the Middle Ages philosophy becomes a purely theoretical and abstract activity, no longer a way of life. Moreover, beside the absorption of philosophy by Christian theology, the teaching of philosophy in the modern university further obscures the distinction between philosophical discourse and philosophy as a way of life, to the extent that philosophy is evidently no longer a kind of life, “unless it is the kind of life of the professor of philosophy” (*ES*, pp. 56–57, 222–24). Of course, Hadot also notes certain aspects of the work of Descartes, Spinoza, Schopenhauer, Bergson, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the existentialists that recover, by different means, some of the existential dimensions of the spiritual exercises of ancient philosophy (see *ES*, pp. 57, 223–24, 232). But it is clear that, in modern times, philosophical discourse has all but overtaken philosophy as a way of life. And this shift has had deep consequences for the conception and representation of philosophy. In ancient philosophy, it was “not only Chrysippus or Epicurus who are considered philosophers because they developed a philosophical discourse, but also every man who lives according to the precepts of Chrysippus or Epicurus” (*ES*, p. 225). Even someone who neither wrote

nor taught anything was considered a philosopher, if his life was, for instance, perfectly Stoic. There were men who lived all of Stoicism, who spoke like Stoics and who saw the world like Stoics. They attempted to realize the ideal of Stoic wisdom, a certain way of being a man; their whole being, and not only their moral behavior, was involved in trying to live a particular kind of philosophical life. Such a way of life was the ancient embodiment of philosophy. "Ancient philosophy proposes an art of living to man; modern philosophy, on the contrary, presents itself above all as the construction of a technical language reserved for specialists" (*ES*, p. 225).

By focusing on the *askesis* of philosophy, on the practice of spiritual exercises, and by linking this practice to a specific representation of the goals and motivations of philosophy, Hadot forces us to rethink our own modern presumptions in reading ancient texts (see *ES*, pp. 52, 56–57, 222). But Hadot's interest in ancient spiritual exercises is not merely a literary or historical one, since he recognizes in this work of the self on itself an essential aspect of the philosophical life: "philosophy is an art of life, a style of life that engages the whole of existence" (*ES*, p. 230). This combination of overarching philosophical interest with the detailed historical and literary study of ancient philosophy also aptly characterizes the last published works of Michel Foucault, not only his last two books, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, but a series of related essays that deal with both ancient philosophy and early Christianity.⁴ Indeed, in order fully to understand Foucault's motivations and his object of study, one must take into account the way in which Hadot's work on ancient spiritual exercises helped to form his entire project. I do not think that it is an exaggeration to claim that Foucault's study of ancient sexual behavior is guided or framed in terms of Hadot's notion of spiritual exercises, that Foucault's aim is to link the practices of the self exhibited in the domain of sexual behavior to the spiritual training and exercise that govern the whole of one's existence.⁵ In ancient thought, governing one's sexual practices was one aspect of that governing of oneself that was a goal of spiritual *askesis*.

We know that Foucault first approached Hadot at the end of 1980 and recommended that Hadot present his candidacy for election to the

4. See Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, vols. 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1985 and 1986); *Résumé des cours, 1970–82* (Paris, 1989). The relevant courses are from 1979–80, 1980–81, and 1981–82; "The Battle for Chastity," in *Western Sexuality: Practice and Precept in Past and Present Times*, ed. Philippe Ariès and André Béjin (Oxford, 1985); "L'Écriture de soi," *Corps écrit*, no. 3 (1983): 3–23; *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst, Mass., 1988).

5. See Foucault, "Subjectivité et vérité, 1980–81," *Résumé des cours, 1970–82*, pp. 136–39.

Collège de France. By this time, Foucault had already been a careful reader of Hadot's work, including his major essay on spiritual exercises originally published in 1977 and reprinted as the first chapter of *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (see *ES*, p. 229). Although there are important differences of interpretation and emphasis, both philosophical and historical, between Hadot and Foucault, differences that deserve their own separate study, I want here simply to indicate the basic convergence of interest that links their work. By understanding Foucault's debt to Hadot, one is, in my opinion, better able to understand the point of his last works. The introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*, which effectively serves as an introduction to both this volume and *The Care of the Self*, sets forth Foucault's intentions in undertaking his study of ancient sexual practices. Foucault wanted to isolate the component of morality that he called "ethics" or the self's relationship to itself. Distinct from the study of codes of moral behavior, Foucault wanted to write a history of "ethics," which he also regularly called "ascetics," "understood as a history of the forms of moral subjectivation and of the practices of the self that are meant to insure it."⁶ Foucault thought of the self's relationship to itself as having four main aspects: the ethical substance, that part of oneself that is taken to be the relevant domain for ethical judgment; the mode of subjection, the way in which the individual establishes his relation to moral obligations and rules; the self-forming activity or ethical work that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself into an ethical subject; and, finally, the telos, the mode of being at which one aims in behaving ethically.⁷ As Foucault summarizes his intention, it is to study

a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to undertake to know himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself. [*UP*, p. 28; translation slightly modified]

We can recognize here Foucault's appropriation of Hadot's framework for interpreting ancient thought. In Hadot's terminology, Foucault's aim is to isolate those spiritual exercises, which cannot be reduced to a code of good conduct, whose aim is the exercise of wisdom, the philosophical way of life. And parallel to Hadot's argu-

6. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, p. 29; hereafter abbreviated *UP*.

7. See *UP*, pp. 26–28. See also Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1984), pp. 340–72. I have discussed Foucault's conception of ethics at greater length in "Archaeology, Genealogy, Ethics," in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (Oxford, 1986), pp. 221–33.

ment that these spiritual exercises gradually became almost eclipsed by a conception of philosophy as an abstract, theoretical activity, so Foucault, on a different level, argued that codes of behavior gradually came to be emphasized at the expense of forms of subjectivation. Foucault singled out classical Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman philosophy as places where these elements of *askesis* were most emphasized, were strongest and most dynamic (see *UP*, pp. 29–30). Hadot's notion of spiritual exercises provides both the interpretive framework and conceptual basis for Foucault's study of ancient sexual ethics. Hadot's history of spiritual exercises makes it possible to see how the history of ethics can be, in certain historical periods, a history of *askesis*, and how the occlusion of this dimension of the philosophical life is tied to changing representations of philosophy itself. Foucault, like all original and creative thinkers, developed his thought within a very specific context of filiation. If, as is now widely recognized, the work of Georges Canguilhem is indispensable to understanding the early Foucault, the work of Pierre Hadot is crucial to understanding his last writings.⁸ But what Hadot has done, beyond his influence on any particular thinkers, is to open up dimensions of ancient philosophy we have typically overlooked or forgotten. Thus, he has rediscovered and reconceptualized the significance of ancient philosophy for our present moment in philosophy's unfolding history. As he has written:

And I consider as a sign of the times the fact, to my eyes unexpected and bewildering, that at the close of the twentieth century, Foucault, myself, and certainly many others at the same time as us, at the end of totally different itineraries, would have encountered each other in this living rediscovery of ancient experience. [*ES*, p. 233]

8. On Foucault's relation to Canguilhem, see Gary Gutting, *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Scientific Reason* (Cambridge, 1989). Of course, I do not want to underestimate other profound influences on Foucault's last works, especially the writings of Paul Veyne. But Hadot's relation to Foucault has been much less appreciated, and never, to my knowledge, discussed in detail. Furthermore, his influence on Foucault seems to me no less significant than the influence, frequently acknowledged, of Veyne. I hope to study the relationship among Hadot, Foucault, Veyne, and Georges Dumezil at greater length elsewhere.