# *Introduction*

To change life. To change, at least, one life. Few books have this effect. And yet, after reading the English translation of *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* [What is ancient philosophy?], this is what a young American, who was not a philosopher but a historian, wrote to Pierre Hadot: "You changed my life." This reader anticipated a question that I asked Hadot in these interviews: "Beyond their great erudition, are your books not *protreptics,* that is, books that aim to turn (*trepein* in Greek) the reader toward philosophical life?" There is a discrepancy between the two projects—on the one hand, to inform the reader of a set of facts that show, without much possible argument, that for the Greeks philosophy was not the construction of a system, but a choice of life; and, on the other, to discreetly "turn" this reader toward philosophy understood in this sense. It is a discrepancy reflected in the difference between the French title of Pierre Hadot's book, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (it is hard to imagine a less catchy title, but the book has sold well), and the title of the English translation, published and prefaced by Arnold Davidson, one of the interlocutors of the present interviews: *Philosophy as a Way of Life.* This unfaithful title is not completely misleading, however. Here, Hadot explains what might be called the *indirectly protreptic* character of his three great works of erudition on ancient philosophy: *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (1981), *La Citadelle intérieur* [The inner citadel] (1992), and *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (1995). Rather than telling people to "do this," he says, invoking Kierkegaard's "method of indirect communication," one can, "thanks to the description of the spiritual experience lived by another [ . . . ], let the reader glimpse and suggest a spiritual attitude, let him hear a call . . . " (Chapter 9). These three books do this with irreproachable erudition that is always clear and is never unwieldy, and the call has been heard, as is proved by the letters Hadot re-

ceived. Perhaps the present book goes slightly beyond these discreet suggestions. It is no longer a *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* although the Greek and Latin philosophers often come up for discussion. "The main problem that poses itself to the philosopher," Hadot remarks—not programmatically, at the beginning of these interviews, but right at the end, as if he were summing up his views—"is ultimately to know what it is to do philosophy" (Chapter 8). To this central question—*What is it to do philosophy?*—Hadot ultimately gives only one answer, but an answer that is modulated in rather diverse forms, as though variations on a theme. These answers are inscribed, first of all, within his intellectual and moral "itinerary," which is retraced in the first two interviews and revisited in the questions raised in subsequent interviews. Here, the questions raised are those of how one should read and interpret ancient philosophy; what is perennial about it, and what might no longer be acceptable today; what value judgment may be pronounced today on those "experimental laboratories" that constitute ancient philosophy; and, in a word, how they may help us to live better today.

Hadot's first response was quite precocious: he was practically still a child when the sky—the starry sky—granted him an unforgettable, inexpressible experience (where the idea that what is most important cannot be said already appears) that he subsequently recognized as what Romain Rolland called the "oceanic feeling": "I was filled with an anxiety that was both terrifying and delicious, provoked by the sentiment of the presence of the world, or of the Whole [*Tout*], and of myself as part of this world" (Chapter 1). "I think that I have been a philosopher since that time," Hadot says some sixty years later (Chapter 1). Thus he did not wait for his encounter with ancient philosophers (he studied Thomism first, a systematic philosophy if ever there was one) to discover that philosophy is not the construction of a system but a lived experience. Today, Hadot identifies Rolland's "oceanic feeling" with Michel Hulin's "savage mysticism," which he mentions several times in the conversations presented here. To the mysticism of negation and separation that as an adult had so fascinated him in Plotinus (*aphele panta*, "remove everything"), he prefers a mysticism of welcoming: "welcome all things." When one reads the superb anthology Hadot chose to conclude this volume, one understands that the "oceanic feeling," experienced several times throughout his life,

has not ceased to nourish his philosophical reflection. This is the only theme whose origin he does not find in ancient thought: in admirable texts, the ancients expressed their amazement at the cosmos, and their lively awareness of belonging to the great chain of being that puts us into solidarity with stones, trees, animals, men, and the stars; but if they felt this sense of *fusion* with the Whole, they did not say so.

Hadot's first real contact with ancient philosophy was indirect. It was through Montaigne that he encountered the famous Platonic definition: *Philosophy is an exercise in dying.* "Perhaps I did not understand it properly at the time," Hadot says today, "but it was in fact one of the texts that led me to represent philosophy as something other than a theoretical discourse" (Chapter 8). This text, fecund precisely because it tolerates several interpretations when taken absolutely and out of context, gradually migrated to the heart of the reflection of Pierre Hadot, both as a scholar and as a man.

Yet it was not this Platonic phrase from Montaigne that led Hadot to discover that ancient philosophical discourses were not the construction of systems, but of what he called—upon reflection, and without worrying about going against fashion (which has never been a concern for him)—"spiritual exercises." On the contrary, it was the observation of a typical Frenchman, who had been taught since junior high school to write a well-structured essay, without repetitions or redundancies, and with a clear outline. He noted that ancient philosophical discourse did not meet these criteria of order and clarity: Aristotle and Augustine had poor composition skills, while Plato's dialogues contradict one another. Hadot is obviously not the first to point this out, but he derived an important consequence from this observation. Here, in a way that is perhaps more accessible than in his previous works, Hadot shows that these incoherencies can be explained if one admits that ancient philosophers were speaking (and, secondarily, writing) for a specific audience or listener. They sought not to inform, but to persuade, transform, or produce a "formative effect." In short, the ancient treatises are, almost without exception, protreptics, and at the same time these discourses, whether dialogues or not, are also "thought experiments" or exercises in "how to think," for the benefit of the listener and sometimes with his or her collaboration. It is because philosophy was above all a way of life for the ancients that they called

the Cynics, who had no theoretical discourse, philosophers, as they did personages of every kind—women, simple citizens, and politicians—who wrote nothing and did not teach, but lived as philosophers. They admired Socrates for his life and his death more than for his doctrine, which was not written and was immediately taken over and modified by those who used his name. In the present conversations, Hadot gives brief indications on the resurgence of this theme beyond the Christian Middle Ages. He also emphasizes the temptation, for all philosophers, to believe that doing philosophy means constructing an impeccable, and preferably new, theoretical discourse. "The more or less skillful construction of a conceptual edifice was to become an end in itself" (Chapter 3), and "the philosopher always has a tendency to be content with his own discourse" (Chapter 8). This slope is especially slippery in a country in which the formal philosophical essay opens the door to many an honorable career.

The interpretation that Pierre Hadot, today armed with a long familiarity with the ancient texts, whether of the Platonic or the Stoic tradition, gives of Plato's text on the exercise of or training for death departs radically from any fascination for death, from the Christian memento mori, and from any exegesis that claims death is preferable to life. For Hadot, to train for death is really to train for life, that is, to transcend "the partial and biased self" [*le moi partiel et partial*], to elevate oneself to a "view from above," to a "universal perspective." This triple theme, which is ultimately one and the same, is constantly taken up like a leitmotif in the course of these interviews, for it finds an application at every level and in all of life's situations, for all the human brotherhood. Transcending "partial and biased self" means first to become aware of our belonging to the human community, and of our need to keep the good of this *koinônia* constantly in view when we act. Hadot, following others, has no difficulty in showing the importance of this theme, not only in the discourse of ancient philosophy, but also in the practice of the philosophers, from Socrates to Plotinus, and of all those who, without being "professional" philosophers, have been inspired by their precepts. Was it known that the Scaevolas, adepts of Stoicism, proved themselves to be honest magistrates? Or that Mucius Scaevola, as governor of a province, did not fill his pockets, as was customary, but paid for his trips with his own money, and demanded the same integrity from his subordinates? Or that when the Stoic emperor

Marcus Aurelius, who was accountable for millions of subjects, learned of the deaths of child trapeze artists, he went to the trouble of commanding that these exercises should henceforth be protected by nets? Or that, defending the Roman borders against the Sarmatians somewhere in the Balkans, he asked himself about the legitimacy of that war? These principles and examples would be useful in today's democracies, without there being any need to "update" them.

For Pierre Hadot, following the ancients, and especially Aristotle, this rule of the overcoming of the "partial and biased self," and the "view from above" or the "universal perspective," is also incumbent upon the scholar: "Whoever studies a text, or microbes, or the stars, must rid himself of his subjectivity" (Chapter 4). Both in the practice of democracy and in scientific work, "one must rid oneself of the partiality of the individual, impassioned ego to elevate oneself to the universality of the rational self" (Chapter 4). On this occasion, Hadot challenges the fashionable idea that all discourses are of equal value, that all interpretations are equally subjective, and that it is impossible not only to attain objectivity, but even to attempt to do so. Let there be no mistake, however: when it comes to the historian—in particular the historian of philosophy—adopting a universal perspective by no means implies that one interprets texts as though they were outside time, place, or the society in which they were produced. Hadot explains the path that made him switch from an atemporal and atopical conception of philosophical discourse, which he says is too widespread, to one that takes precise account of its insertion within history (Chapter 8).

For the ancients, this self-overcoming and universal perspective concerns not only the scholar and the politician, but the entire human race. The Greeks were the first to conceive of the unity of the human community, including slaves, and to proclaim themselves "citizens of the world." When asked about the meaning of this "universal perspective," and about its relation to Kant's "universal law" (Chapter 8), Hadot underlines their resemblances: in Kant, "morality creates itself in the unexpected, and, in a sense, heroic leap that brings us from a limited perspective to a universal perspective" (Chapter 8), or again: "from a self that sees only its own interest to a self open to other human beings and to the universe" (Chapter 8). This is indeed the heritage of Socrates,

who said to the Athenians, "Who more than I has forgotten his personal interest to concern himself about you?"

Three other themes are intertwined with those that have just been mentioned, and they are admirably expressed—much better than could be done in these few lines—in the small collection of texts that closes the volume. Hadot initially encountered the first theme in his high school leaving exam, when he wrote an essay on a text by Henri Bergson that defined philosophy as "the decision, taken once, to look at the world *naively,* in and around oneself." He found this naive perception in the ancients, for example, in Seneca's text that he cites, but also in painters and poets closer to our time. Another connected theme is the feeling of the importance of the instant, constantly expressed by the Stoics and the Epicureans (this is the real meaning of the Epicurean Horace's *carpe diem*), but also by certain modern authors, such as Montaigne and Goethe—the present alone is our happiness. This wealth of the instant is tied to what Hadot calls "the pure happiness of existing"—wonder, but also, for the moderns, anxiety and even terror before the enigma of existence.

As one can see, these themes are interlinked. The "oceanic feeling" is the cutting edge of what Hadot calls cosmic consciousness: to experience the importance of the present instant—the only time and the only place we can grasp in the immensity of the times and places of which we are a part—means to live each hour as if it were the last, but also the first (Chapter 10), as though looking at the world "naively," for the first time. And the consciousness of belonging to the world is also inclusion in the community of humankind, with all the duties that derive from this status. Shall we say that Hadot has yielded in his turn to the temptation to construct an impeccable system? By no means. Metaphysics and ontology are entirely absent from the present volume. Plato once tried to prove to us rationally that virtue is more advantageous than vice, that it is in our interest to do good. There is nothing like that here. Nothing is proved to us. Happiness is not promised; in fact, nothing at all is promised. We are simply told that today, as in the time of Socrates or Marcus Aurelius, a certain number of principles that guided the everyday life of these philosophers might also produce for us a life that is "more conscious, more rational, more open to others and to the immensity of the world" (Chapter 7).

This is, then, a book written for everyone. Does this mean it holds no interest for people who make a living teaching philosophy? I do not think so. A mix of coincidences and predictable consequences has given this book three voices, united by friendship. Arnold I. Davidson is professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago; he is the person primarily responsible for introducing Pierre Hadot to the United States, and for arranging for his works to be translated into English. For some time he had had the project of conducting interviews with Hadot. When Hélène Monsacré, our editor—aware of my very old friendship with Hadot and his wife—asked him to accept to answer my questions, the four of us decided that Davidson and I would share the task. We were well aware that our questions, our interests, and our spheres of competence were not the same. Davidson is a true philosopher, very much up to date in all contemporary philosophical problems. For my part, in my seminar at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, I evoked themes that were only marginally philosophical, such as the critique of astrology, prayer, and Stoic determinism. The result is that, like ancient philosophical discourses, this book contains, if not contradictions, at least repetitions, themes approached from different points of view—one could almost say, answers that are adapted to the listener, whether a "profane" or a "professional" philosopher. Its unity is closer to that of a sonata than to that of a philosophical essay. Thus it is clear that the question here is not about the construction of a system, but about philosophy as a way of life.

*Jeannie Carlier*