

Preface: Éloge: Pierre Hadot

To Ilsetraut Hadot

The enthusiastic and widespread reception of the work of Pierre Hadot throughout the last twenty years of his life, and not only in the United States but also in France, was a surprise to Hadot himself. We often mused about his transformation from a distinguished scholar of ancient philosophy to a philosopher read, discussed, and interviewed by many people who had probably never studied an ancient text. Hadot's philological rigor, his desire, both intellectual and ethical, to arrive at the most objective understanding of a text was central to his philosophical vision: he once recounted to me the many hours he spent trying to decide where to put a comma in a translation of a passage of Plotinus. He had no sympathy for what he saw as the all too frequent intellectual laziness or laxity that affects so many philosophers, and that he thought of as a form of egoism. At the end of his "Preface" to *The Inner Citadel*, thinking of a certain kind of fashionable European philosophy, he wrote:

I hate those monographs which, instead of letting the author speak and staying close to the text, engage in obscure elucubrations which claim to carry out an act of decoding and reveal the "unsaid" of the thinker, without the reader's having the slightest idea of what that thinker really "said." Such a method unfortunately permits all kinds of deformations, distortions, and sleight of hand. Our era is captivating for all kinds of reasons: too often, however, from the philosophical and literary point of view, it could be defined as the era of the misinterpretation, if not of the pun: people can, it seems, say anything about anything. When I quote Marcus Aurelius, I want my reader to make contact with the text itself, which is superior to any commentary. I would like him to see how my interpretation tries to base itself on the text, and that he can verify my affirmations directly and immediately.¹

In Hadot's eyes the deformations of a certain kind of obscure "continental" misinterpretation and wordplay were matched by the deformations of a certain kind of "analytical" historical negligence and ignorance:

. . . ancient texts cannot be treated as though they were contemporary texts, at the risk of completely deforming their meaning. This is often the error of analytic philosophers, who treat philosophers without any historical distance. It is as if they are astonished that Aristotle was not aware of Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica*. It seems to me that the primary quality of a historian of philosophy, and no doubt of a philosopher, is to have a sense for history.²

Nevertheless, the ascetic demands of Hadot's own method did not prevent his recognition of the deepest aspirations of philosophy, a set of ideals that were essential to his interpretation of all of the schools of ancient philosophy, namely philosophy's continual desire to "respond to the questions that human beings ask themselves regarding their own life," questions about their way of living, their mode of life.³ The idea of a "popular" or "cosmic" philosophy, of a philosophy that was made to leave "the closed, rigid circle of the school so that it could become accessible and useful to everyone" became fundamental to Hadot's conception and drew its inspiration from his "scientific" study of ancient texts.⁴ The configuration of discipline, clarity, objectivity, and accessibility outlined the circle of virtues so important to Hadot in his own work. Nowhere is Hadot's elucidation of his vision more direct and beautifully articulated than in his popular article, "Is Philosophy a Luxury?," first published in *Le Monde de l'éducation* and included in this new edition of our book of conversations. After discussing the long and important history of philosophy as a sort of meta-discourse, Hadot expresses his dissatisfaction with this definition of the nature of philosophy through the following questions:

What is ultimately the most useful for human beings *qua* human beings? Is it discourse on language, or on being and non-being? Isn't it, rather, to learn how to live a human life?⁵

Only the most academically hardened and distracted philosophers, and there are many, could fail to be attracted by the appeal made tangible through these questions. Yet philosophers as different and as accomplished

as Michel Foucault and Hilary Putnam responded to this appeal. Hadot's conception of the philosophical quest overlaps with Stanley Cavell's magnificent description of the audience for philosophy:

The question of philosophy's audience is born with philosophy itself. When Socrates learned that the Oracle had said no man is wiser than Socrates, he interpreted this to mean, we are told, that he knew that he did not know. And we are likely to take this as a bit of faded irony or as a stuffy humility. What I take Socrates to have seen is that, about the questions which were causing him wonder and hope and confusion and pain, he knew that he did not know what no man can know, and that any man can learn what he wanted to learn. No man is in any better position for knowing it than any other man—unless *wanting* to know is a special position. And this discovery about himself is the same as the discovery of philosophy, when it is the effort to find answers, and permit questions, which nobody knows the way to nor the answer to any better than you yourself. Then what makes it relevant to know, worth knowing? But relevance and worth may not be the point. The effort is irrelevant and worthless until it becomes necessary to you to know such things.⁶

Hadot was under no illusions about the difficulties of philosophy as a way of life. To live the life of a person “conscious of himself, ceaselessly rectifying his thought and his action, conscious of his belonging to humanity and to the world,” achieving “philosophical consciousness,” is a task constantly compromised by “worries, necessities, the banalities of everyday life [that] prevent us from acceding to this life conscious of all its possibilities,” a consciousness that could be “crushed by poverty and suffering”:

How can one harmoniously unite everyday life and philosophical consciousness? It can only be a fragile conquest, always threatened.⁷

Hadot's recognition of and increasing philosophical concern with the realities of everyday life reflects a subtle but significant displacement of his philosophical sympathies from Neoplatonism to Epicureanism and especially Stoicism. In the “Postface” to his new edition of *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*, Hadot, after insisting on the value that Plotinus accords to the sensible world, speaks from his own perspective:

It is nonetheless the case that it [the sensible world] is in his [Plotinus'] eyes but a degraded and inferior reality from which one must distance oneself. However, can't one also discover the inexpressible, the mysterious, the transcendent, per-

haps the Absolute, in the inexhaustible richness of the present moment and in the contemplation of the most concrete, the most banal, the most everyday, the most humble, the most immediate reality, and can one not sense there the always present Presence? “Cut away everything,” Plotinus said. But, in a living contradiction, shouldn’t one also say, “Welcome all things”?⁸

In our conversation on mystical experience, referring to this passage, Hadot speaks of a “mysticism of welcome” and goes on to cite an experience of Hugo von Hofmannsthal that is a lyrical evocation of the presence of the infinite in the everyday.⁹ If “the illusion of the ‘purely spiritual,’ far from concrete reality,” was a danger that led Hadot to acknowledge the “untenable position” of Neoplatonism, he still insisted on the vitality of ancient philosophy, on the sources of his own idea of philosophy in Stoicism and Epicureanism: “Certain Epicurean thoughts, certain aphorisms by Marcus Aurelius, and certain pages by Seneca can suggest attitudes that can still be taken up today.”¹⁰ More generally, considering the relationship between philosophy and the everyday, Hadot emphasized both our habits and prejudices that required our uprooting ourselves from the everyday and, with Socrates, the idea and commitment that philosophy is “an activity that is absolutely everyday,” an habitual everyday and an everyday transfigured by philosophical perception.¹¹

Pierre Hadot always tried to put into practice the transfiguring spiritual exercises of philosophy, and the hundreds of conversations I had with him, including the final ones, were permeated by a conjunction of Stoic vigilance and Epicurean joy. His ethical diligence never resulted in moralism and his pleasure in the simple fact of existing made his presence therapeutic. Even though we were separated by the distances of age and cultural background, we were brought together by a friendship that had no barriers. We had innumerable discussions about, and Hadot was passionately interested in, the ways in which the notions of spiritual exercises and philosophy as a way of life could be applied and extended to unexpected domains. His late interest in the history of Chinese thought and in Buddhism and my attempt to use these notions in thinking about improvisation in music and in writing about Primo Levi reinforced, for both of us, a sense of the scope and richness of a set of ideas and practices that arose in a much narrower context.¹² No one could have foreseen how deeply Hadot’s work responded to what so many people were trying to

articulate. He was especially gratified, as am I, by the reaction of students who, in reading Hadot, refound their enthusiasm for philosophy and were led to remember why philosophy matters. I look back with gratitude on the good fortune that, during the last months of Hadot's life, we were able to work together on producing a final version of what would turn out to be our last published conversation, and I am thankful that he lived to see the publication of the first book devoted to his thought, *Pierre Hadot, l'enseignement des antiques, l'enseignement des modernes*.¹³

Although toward the end we inevitably and often spoke about the frailty of the body and its physical distress, Hadot's voice always exhibited a philosophical detachment that was no doubt related to his sense of cosmic consciousness, that exercise that allows the individual "to become aware of his place in the universe, thus to detach himself from his egoistic point of view, and also to get him to become aware of his belonging not only to the Whole of the universe, but also to the Whole of the human community."¹⁴ He loved the remark of Nietzsche that he quoted at the end of *The Veil of Isis*: "To go beyond myself and yourself. To experience in a cosmic way." Future generations of both young and old will pick up a book by Pierre Hadot and discover the attractions of philosophy. Some of them will perhaps go on to become philosophers, others will be enticed to read for the first time Plato, Plotinus, Marcus Aurelius, or Seneca, still others, and one can only hope some of those just mentioned, will be moved to transform their way of life. Pierre Hadot would certainly not have asked for more.

Every weekend, the time I typically spoke to him, I still hear Pierre's voice and I am reminded of the words that Vladimir Jankélévitch wrote about Léon Brunschvicg: "there remains for us the lesson of high integrity in which, after all, his life and his work can be summed up."¹⁵

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