

Introduction

To change life. Even to change a life. Few books have this effect. And yet, after reading *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?" Carrying out this aim involves two distinct projects: on the one hand, to inform the reader of a set of facts that decisively show that for the Greeks philosophy was not the construction of a system but a choice of life; and on the other hand, to allow the reader to turn toward philosophy thus understood. The distinction is captured by the difference between the French title of Hadot's book *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* [Spiritual exercises and ancient philosophy], which certainly does not grab one's attention (although it sold well), and the title of the English translation, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. This unfaithful title is certainly not misleading, however. In the interviews contained in this volume, 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 intérieure* [The inner citadel] (1992), and *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (1995). He invokes Kierkegaard's "method of indirect communication" and suggests that rather than telling people to "do this," one "allows a call to be heard"; by describing the "spiritual exercises lived by another, [one can] give a glimpse of and suggest a spiritual attitude, allow a call to be heard" (Chapter 9). These three books do this with irreproachable erudition that remains clear and is never weighty. Letters that Hadot has received from readers are, as it were, proof that the call has been heard. Perhaps the present book goes slightly beyond these dis-

crete suggestions. The discussions presented in it do not attempt to answer the question *What is ancient philosophy?* even though they do often discuss Greek and Latin philosophers. “The main problem that poses itself to the philosopher,” Hadot maintains—not at the beginning of these interviews, as a program, but at the end, as an assessment—“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 modulations of his response are inscribed in his intellectual and personal “path” of development, which is retraced in the first interviews and revisited in subsequent interviews in the course of discussing how to read and interpret ancient philosophy, what is perennial in it and what might no longer be acceptable for us; about the value we can find in the “experimental laboratories” that are the ancient philosophies; and in a word, about how they can help us to live better.

In its first form, Hadot’s response is extraordinarily precocious: he was practically still a child when the sky—the starry sky—granted him an unforgettable, inexpressible experience (remarkably, the idea that what is most important cannot be said appeared already) that he subsequently recognized as what Romain Rolland called the “oceanic sentiment”: “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. Hadot identifies Rolland’s “oceanic sentiment” with Michel Hulin’s “savage mysticism,” which he discusses several times in the conversations presented here. To the mysticism of negation and separation that in his youth had so fascinated him in Plotinus (*aphele panta*, “remove everything”) he prefers a mysticism of welcoming: “welcome all things.” Hadot’s superb anthology that concludes this volume makes it clear that the “oceanic sentiment,” felt many times throughout his life, has not ceased to nourish his philosophical reflection. This is the only theme that does not originate in ancient thought: in their admirable texts the ancients

expressed their amazement before the cosmos and the lived 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 discovered 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). Montaigne's text is rich precisely because, when it is not taken absolutely and out of context, it supports several interpretations, and it gradually migrates to the heart of Hadot's reflection both as a scholar and as a human being.

Yet it was not this Platonic phrase from Montaigne that allowed Hadot to discover that ancient philosophical discourses did not aim to construct systems; he came to see this through what (on reflection and without worrying about adhering to current trends, which is never a concern for him) he called "spiritual exercises." It was rather the realization of a Frenchman who by grade 9 had already been taught to write a well-formed essay with a clear discourse and without repetition or contradiction. Ancient philosophical discourse, by contrast, did not respond to criteria of order and clarity. The works of Aristotle and Augustine are poorly written, and those of Plato contradict themselves. Although Hadot is obviously not the first to have pointed out these facts, he calls our attention to a particularly important consequence. In the present interviews, addressing himself to the nonspecialist more directly than in perhaps any of his previous works, Hadot shows that the inconsistencies of ancient philosophers are explained by the fact that they are addressed to a specific audience or listener: Hadot aimed not to inform but rather to persuade, transform, or produce a "formative effect"—in short, to persuade the listener that the ancient treatises are, almost without exception, protreptics, and that at the same time these discourses, whether dialogues or not, are also "experiences of thought" or exercises in "how to think," for the benefit of the listener and sometimes with his or her collaboration. For the ancients, philosophy was above all a way of life, and this is why they called not only the Cynics, who had no theoretical discourse, philosophers, but

also anyone—including women, simple citizens, and political men—who lived as a philosopher, even without writing or teaching. These people were called philosophers because the ancients considered philosophy to be above all a way of life. They admired Socrates for his life and his death more than for his doctrine, which was not written and was immediately captured and modified by those who used his name. In the present conversations, Hadot gives brief indications of this theme's resurgence beyond the Christian Middle Ages. He also emphasizes the temptation, for all philosophers, to believe that to do philosophy is to construct an impeccable and absolutely new theoretical discourse. "The more or less skillful construction of a conceptual edifice will 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 steep in a country in which the formal philosophical essay sows the first seeds of many honorable merits.

Hadot's interpretation of Plato's text on the exercise of death, reinforced by years of extensive work with the ancient texts from both the Platonic and the Stoic traditions, departs entirely from the fascination with death, from the Christian *memento mori* as from all exegesis that would make death preferable to life. For Hadot, to exercise death is really to exercise life, that is, to overcome "the partial and biased self" [*le moi partiel et partial*], to elevate oneself to a "vision from above," to a "universal perspective." This triadic, but ultimately unified theme is—like a leitmotif—constantly taken up in the course of these interviews, for Hadot sees possible applications in all the dimensions and situations of everyday life, for all human beings. To overcome the "partial and biased self" is first to become aware of our belonging to the human community, and of the necessity to keep the good of this *koinônia* in view when we act. Hadot masterfully shows the importance of this theme both in the discourse of ancient philosophy and in the practice of the ancient philosophers, from Socrates to Plotinus, as well as of all those who, without being "professional" philosophers, have been inspired by their precepts. Was it known that the Scaevolae, adepts of Stoicism, showed themselves to be honest magistrates? Or that governor Mucius Scaevola paid for his trips out of his own pocket rather than use his position to fill his pockets, and even demanded that his subordinates share this integrity? Or that when

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 he asked himself about the legitimacy of the war in which he was involved as he defended the Roman borders against the Sarmatians somewhere in the Balkans? These principles and examples are useful for application to contemporary contexts without having to be updated.

In line with the ancient philosophers, perhaps especially Aristotle, Hadot considers this rule—the overcoming of the “partial and biased self,” and the “look from above” or the “universal perspective”—also to constrain the scholar: “In order to study a text or microbes or the stars, one must undo oneself from one’s subjectivity” (Chapter 4). Both in the practice of democracy and in scientific work, “one must undo oneself from the partiality of the individual and impassioned self in order to elevate oneself to the universality of the rational self” (Chapter 4). Hadot breaks a spear on the timely idea that all discourses are of equal value, that all interpretations are equally subjective, that is, incapable not only of attaining objectivity but even of attempting to do so. Let there be no mistake, however: because the historian—in particular the historian of philosophy—is in question, it is clear that adopting a universal perspective can in no way imply the aim to interpret texts as though they were outside time, place, or the society in which they were produced. Hadot explains the shift in his course of development from an atemporal and atotopical conception of philosophical discourse, which he considers to be nefariously widespread, to one that takes its historical inscription into account with precision (Chapter 8).

For the ancients, this self-overcoming or universal perspective concerns not only the scholar and the politician but the entire human genre. The Greeks were the first to conceive of the unity of the human community, slaves included, 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 “from a self that sees only its own interest to a self open to other humans 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 take care of you?”

Three further, related themes are admirably expressed—much more effectively than I could do here in a few lines—in the small collection of texts that closes the volume. Hadot initially encountered the first theme in high school when writing 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, as well as in painters and poets closer to our time. Another connected theme is related to the awareness of the importance of the instant constantly expressed by the Stoics and the Epicureans (this is the actual 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.

These themes are quite obviously intertwined. The “oceanic sentiment” is the fine point of what Hadot calls cosmic conscience: to experience the present instant—the only time and the only place we can grasp in the immensity of the times and places to which we belong—means “to live as though we were seeing the world both for the last and for the first time” (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 humans, with the ensuing duties. Will we say that Hadot has ceded in turn to the temptation to construct an impeccable system? In no way. Metaphysics and ontology are entirely absent from the present volume. Plato had previously attempted to prove rationally that virtue is more advantageous than vice, that it is in our interest to do good. This is not the case here. Nothing is proven. Happiness is not promised. In fact, nothing at all is promised. We are told only that today, as in the day of Socrates or Marcus Aurelius, a certain number of principles that guided the everyday life of these philosophers can 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).

Thus this is a book written for everyone. Does this mean it holds no interest for professional philosophers? 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—approached him about a series of interviews, 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 really a philosopher and very attuned to all of the contemporary philosophical problems. For my part, I evoked themes that were only marginally philosophical, such as the critique of astrology, prayer, and Stoic determinism, as I do in my seminar at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. 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 address the listener, whether “profane” or “professional” philosopher. Its unity is closer to that of a sonata than to that of an 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