

“ON THE PRESENT IS OUR HAPPINESS”: ON AFFECTS IN  
ANCIENT THOUGHT, IN MEMORIUM PIERRE HADOT

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*The birds they sing  
At the break of day  
'Start again,' I heard them say  
'Don't dwell on what has passed away  
And what is yet to be ...'*

Leonard Cohen, *Anthem*

*Hour by hour, life is kindly offered us  
We have learned but little from yesterday  
Of tomorrow, all knowledge is forbidden,  
And if I ever feared the coming evening, -  
The setting sun still saw what brought me joy.  
Do like me, then: with joyful wisdom  
Look the instant in the eye! Do not delay!  
Hurry! Run to greet it, lively and benevolent,  
Be it for action, for joy or for love!  
Wherever you may be, be like a child, wholly and always;  
Then you will be the All; and invincible.*

Goethe, *Marienbad Elegy*, cited in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 231.<sup>1</sup>

French philosopher Pierre Hadot passed away on the night of April 24-25, 2011. The following is offered as a critical tribute to, and reflection upon his work.

## THESES

The theses of Pierre Hadot's life work, so important in shaping the later Foucault, are now widely known. They are these:

i. Classical philosophy was first of all an existential choice or way of life. This way of life involved developing and learning rational, theoretical discourses, which were often highly sophisticated. But it was not reducible to the production, learning, or conveying of theoretical systems. As Hadot liked to say, it aimed as much to form the student, as to inform them. The aim was to reshape the student's entire way of seeing and being in the world: their relations to external things, their own thoughts, and others. The "wisdom" ancient philosophy pursued, then, was embodied, and presupposed modes of subjective transformation and *askesis*. In the ancient context, indeed, people who:

developed an apparently philosophical discourse without trying to live their lives in accordance with their discourse, and without their discourse emanating from their life experience, were called ‘sophists.’ According to the Stoic Epictetus, [such people] talk about the art of living like human beings, instead of living like human beings themselves... as Seneca put it, they turn true love of wisdom (*philosophia*) into love of words (*philologia*).<sup>2</sup>

ii. The principal means of this existential transformation were what Hadot called “spiritual exercises” (*askesis* or *meletai*). These exercises acted primarily on the opinions of the student, although they could extend to bodily practices promoting mastery of the passions. They involved reasoning about one’s experience and attitudes, and exercises in thought (for instance, the famous *praemeditatio malorum* [premeditation of evils] or *memento mori* [remembrance of mortality]) which often strikingly anticipated modern psychoanalytic and cognitive behavioural techniques. They engendered and involved new, specific institutional forms (like the Platonic academy, the Epicurean garden) and forms of intersubjectivity: Epicurean friendship, the master-pupil relation. They served to constantly orient and reorient the student, despite the hardships, distractions and disappointments of life. Their goal was to constantly reactivate in the student the chosen Stoic, Epicurean, Pyrrhonian, etc. attitude towards existence, so they did not act contrary to a philosophical view of the world, self and others:

In Stoicism, as in Epicureanism, philosophising was a continuous act, permanent and identical with life itself, which had to be renewed at each instant. For both schools, this act could be defined as an orientation of the attention.<sup>3</sup>

iii. For all the philosophical schools, philosophy was hence therapeutic: in Martha Nussbaum’s phrase, a therapy of desire.<sup>4</sup> It found its sufficient motivation in the prevalent human experience of “suffering, disorder, and unconsciousness.”<sup>5</sup> As Callicles already complained of Socrates in Plato’s *Gorgias*, the philosophical way of life involved a near-complete turning upside-down of the motivations, and evaluative attitudes, of ordinary men and women. In particular, the philosophical student was to see the philosophical falsity, and existential vacuity, of the pursuit of money and bodily pleasures, or the goods of fame, as means to human flourishing. Instead, they were to learn to take care of themselves, and pay attention first to the state of their own *psyche*. As Socrates had announced in the *Apology*:

I do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your persons and your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul. I tell you that virtue is not given by money, but that from virtue come money and every other good of man, public as well as private.<sup>6</sup>

iv. Unless we are awake to this ancient, existential conception of philosophy, we cannot understand the literary peculiarities of their written texts—and their systematic caution concerning writing *per se*. First, there are peculiarities of genre: the predominance of “Lives”, as in Diogenes Laertius’ great text, but also Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*; also dialogues, consolations, meditations, and letters. Second: within the ancient philosophical texts, even in their most systematic form, the Aristotelian lecture, contain digressions, repetitions, *aporias* [seeming dead-ends] which can seem to moderns unnecessary, lazy, or signs of simply inferior intellectual development. In Plato’s *Statesman*, for instance, we are at one point told that the entire apparent exercise of trying to find the statesman’s *genos* was “so that we may become better dialecticians on all possible subjects.”<sup>7</sup> For Hadot, to read ancient philosophy awake to its different metaphilosophical perspective was to read each word and line

From the perspective of the effect it was intended to produce in the soul of the auditor or reader ... for the content of the work is partly determined by the necessity of adapting itself to the addressee’s spiritual capacities ... Whether the goal was to console, to cure, or to exhort the audience, the point was always and above all not to communicate to them some

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ready-made knowledge but to *form* them.<sup>8</sup>

v. The classical conception of philosophy is largely lost today, certainly within the university context. The larger reasons for this lie in Christianity’s emergence as a rival *philosophia* in the ancient sense, including adapting many of the philosophical schools’ spiritual exercises. With the closure of the schools, philosophy survived only as discourse (pre-eminently neo-Platonic theology then, in later medieval scholasticism, Aristotelian dialectics), in service to Christian theology. Following the emergence of the natural sciences from theological supervision in the early modern period, philosophical discourse was largely reshaped as a handmaiden to these sciences, or their critic. In figures like Montaigne, Goethe, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein—and even in the literary form of Descartes’ *Meditations* and Kant’s assertion of the primacy of practical reason—the ancient conception of philosophy as a *bios* periodically resurfaces. However, in the modern university context, “philosophy is first and foremost a discourse developed in the classroom, and then consigned to books. It is a text which requires exegesis.”<sup>9</sup> As for its purveyors:

The philosophy professor [is] a civil servant whose job, to a large extent, is training other civil servants. The goal is no longer, as it was in antiquity, to train people for careers as human beings, but to train them for careers as clerks or professors—that is, as specialists, theoreticians, and retainers of specific items of more or less esoteric knowledge. Such knowledge, however, no longer involves the whole of life, as ancient philosophy demanded.<sup>10</sup>

### ANTITHESES

The manifold virtues of Hadot’s work are now widely acknowledged. In harmony with his critique of purely academic philosophy, Hadot’s texts are a model of classical clarity, if not what the Stoics called *aproplosia*, the absence of hurry in judgment. By drawing attention to philosophy as *praxis*, Hadot’s work shows how philosophy did and can still have a role in shaping the ethical lives and cultures of ordinary men and women. The manifold letters which Arnold Davidson relays Hadot received from people around the world, stating how “he had changed their lives” is perhaps the most authentic tribute to the man and his work. From a metaphilosophical perspective, Hadot’s *What is Ancient Philosophy?* and the essays in *Philosophy as a Way of Life* challenge us to each reflect on what drew us to pursuing philosophical discourse, and what it is that we each hope or want from philosophy as we perceive it. From a hermeneutic or academic perspective, finally, the conception of ancient philosophy as a way of life is overwhelmingly supported by manifold textual evidence. It allows us to reopen and critically analyse ancient texts on their own terms. This is not to lay down our critical guns before ancient authorities. It is to understand what we are critiquing, so—unlike the commentators on Aurelius who see his repeated, highly stylised meditations on transience, for instance, as sign of some psychosomatic pathology—our criticisms do not lamentably miss the mark.

Although his work is framed almost exclusively in the form of the commentary, the full force of Hadot’s work, I take it, is not one of scholarly antiquarianism. It is Hadot’s attempt to reanimate for moderns the vital possibility of living transformed, philosophical modes of life. In the allegorical terms of Goethe’s *Faust* Hadot admired, and to which we will return, the restless spirit of the modern Faust must be wedded to Helen, representing ancient, contemplative beauty. To cite the dialectical conclusion to *What is Ancient Philosophy?*:

The reader will no doubt wish to ask if I think the ancient concept of philosophy might still exist today .... I would put the question differently: Isn’t there an urgent need to rediscover the ancient notion of the ‘philosopher’—that living, choosing philosopher without whom the notion of philosophy has no meaning? Why not define the philosopher not as a professor or a writer who develops a philosophical discourse, but, in accordance with the concept which was constant in antiquity, as a person who leads a philosophical life?<sup>11</sup>

In the spirit of ancient dialectic as Hadot describes it, then, let me now pose some critical questions to Hadot's project, and recollect the deep obstacles that seem to me to stand in the way of this reanimation of the ancient model. Hadot himself was aware of these obstacles, as we will see, and I would argue that this awareness shapes his reading of the ancients. Our closing task in the third part of this paper will then be to evaluate the coherence and persuasiveness of his responses to them.

*i. Possibility: the question of metaphysical redundancy.* The ancient philosophical practices Hadot describes all seem to turn on what he recognises look for moderns like unmistakably “antiquated cosmological and mythical elements”: notably, the Ptolemaic-Aristotelian, Stoic or Epicurean, prescientific worldviews.<sup>12</sup> This is a problem faced not simply by Hadot, but other attempts to somehow return to classical ethical or political paradigms: notably that of the Straussian school in the United States. Hadot himself puts things powerfully in his critique of Foucault's later idea of an “aesthetics of the Self” that would allegedly take its orientation from ancient spiritual practices. The return to self practised in classical philosophical *askeses* was a return, specifically, to the higher part of one's self (in the Stoics the *Logos*), which was open to, because one small part of, “the same force and the same reality that is at the same time creative Nature, Norm of conduct and Rule of discourse.”<sup>13</sup> The ancient philosophers' ethical practices hence presupposed, or were framed, by wider metaphysical teachings about the nature of reason (*logos*) and the *cosmos*. Now in Foucault, and we are wondering in Hadot also:

According to a more or less universal tendency of modern thought, which is perhaps more instinctive than reflective, the idea of ‘universal reason’ and ‘universal nature’ do not have meaning any more. It was therefore convenient [for Foucault] to ‘bracket’ them.<sup>14</sup>

In short, our first question is whether Hadot too must not necessarily fall prey to the same problem he assigns to Foucault here, insofar as he too is not in possession of a metaphysics consistent with the ethical practices of self-transformation to which he is drawn in the ancients.

*ii. Desirability: the question of other-worldliness, anaffectivity.* The abiding cultural influence, and overwhelming successes, of scientific naturalism, first; the particular shaping influences of Nietzschean, psychoanalytic, and Hegelian thought on our philosophic culture, second; and a series of deep intuitions concerning the inalienable importance of the body, others, and the affects in living full lives, third<sup>15</sup>; can combine to make us deeply sceptical today of ancient positions which seem to propose forms of other-worldliness and what the Stoics termed *apatheia* (the absence of feeling) as existential ideals. This in Hadot's words is the criticism “according to which ancient philosophy was an escape mechanism, an act of falling back upon oneself,”<sup>16</sup> following the decline of public rights and life in the Hellenistic period—if not an instance of what Nietzscheans call “life-denial.” As Hadot observes:

In the view of all philosophical schools, mankind's principal cause of suffering, disorder and unconsciousness were the passions: that is, unregulated desires and exaggerated fears. People are prevented from truly living, it was taught, because they are dominated by the passions. Philosophy thus appears as a therapeutics of the passions (in the words of Georges Freidman: “Try to get rid of your passions”).<sup>17</sup>

Let us state immediately Hadot's two predominant forms of response to the first charge—that concerning the alleged impossibility of a modern return to classical forms of philosophical practice, in the wake of the Galilean or Newtonian break with ancient physics. This will lead into our consideration of how Hadot does, and how we might on the basis of his work, respond to the second, normative criticisms of possible returns to classical ethical *praxeis*.

Firstly, Hadot repeatedly maintains that the ancient philosophical schools and *bioi* each responded to an elementary existential “experience”: as in Epicureanism, “the voice of the flesh: not to be hungry, not to be thirsty, not to be cold”<sup>18</sup>; or in Stoicism, “of the tragic situation of human beings, who are conditioned by fate

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.... helpless and defenceless in the face of the accidents of life, the setbacks of fortune, illness, and death.”<sup>19</sup> The ancient spiritual exercises which seek to redress these experiences, Hadot thus claims, are “relatively independent” from the metaphysical systems the schools elaborated.<sup>20</sup> These, he claims, came “after the fact ... to describe and justify experiences whose existential density ultimately escapes all attempts at theorising and systematising.”<sup>21</sup> In Aurelius, for instance, Hadot stresses a series of fragments which reflect on what Hadot calls the “providence or chaotic atoms” disjunction. “If the All is God, then all is well”, Marcus for instance says in the *Meditations*.<sup>22</sup> But even if the world is not providentially ordered as Stoic dogmata believe, Aurelius insists that “it would [still] be possible for there to be order in you, and for disorder to reign over the All.”<sup>23</sup> In such an instance, indeed, you might “consider yourself fortunate if, in the midst of such a whirlwind, you possess a guiding intelligence within yourself.”<sup>24</sup>

There is at least a tension between this position, and Hadot’s recognition for instance that the practice of contemplative physics in the ancient schools was recommended as a spiritual *askesis*, and which sees him calling Foucault’s later works to account, as we said.<sup>25</sup> A second response to the problem I believe is more potentially far-reaching. Hadot long resisted drawing the evident parallels between ancient philosophical practice and Eastern soteriological religion or practices, keeping his philologist’s caution concerning cross-cultural misunderstanding. However, further exposure to academic literature on the subject convinced Hadot “that there really are troubling analogies between the philosophical attitudes and those of the Orient.”<sup>26</sup> This remark points towards a deeper set of claims at stake in Hadot’s work, very often concealed beneath the guise of the commentator, and his own reticence to say which particular school of philosophy, if any, he advocates or practices. For instance, Hadot claims that the Epicurean and Stoic attitudes to existence:

Correspond to two opposite but inseparable poles of our inner life: the demands of our moral conscience, and the flourishing of our joy in existing ... tension and relaxation, duty and serenity, moral conscience and the joy of existence.<sup>27</sup>

This means: these philosophical attitudes, far from aleatory choices, on simple par with forms of supernaturalist faith, have deep-set roots in our common or natural human condition. On exactly the classical model, they represent invariant possibilities across times and cultures, which ought to be subject to kinds of demonstration and living *exemplification* which will be persuasive, if not compelling, outside of their own contingent context of genesis. And this is also what Hadot says, closing his programmatic essay “Spiritual Exercises”:

Vauvenargues says: “A truly new and original book would be one which made people love old truths.” It is my hope that I have been “truly new and original” in this sense, since my goal has been to make people love a few old truths. Old truths: ... there are some truths whose meaning will never be exhausted by the generations of man. It is not that they are difficult: on the contrary, they even appear to be banal ... Each generation must take up, from scratch, the task of learning to read and to re-read these “old truths.”<sup>28</sup>

It is this possible response, which can also speak to our anxieties concerning the seeming *apatheiai* of the ancient philosophers, that I wish to take up in the closing section.

## SYNTHESIS: ON AFFECT IN HADOT’S THOUGHT

The charge of anaffectivity, if not a “Platonistic” hatred of this life in classical thought, is animated by passages like *Phaedo* 97c, in which the condemned Socrates tells his companions that philosophy is a practice of dying to the distractions posed by the body’s needs. It cannot be sustained if it is to imply that the classical philosophers were not concerned to theorise the body, its passions or *pathoi*, and our lived relations with others. Instead, precisely as the source of troubling upheavals of thought, the affects attract a diverse set of discourses in ancient philosophy. In this discourse, the continuing modern disputes between Jamesian-style physicalist accounts and cognitive, propositional-, or belief-centred accounts is significantly anticipated.<sup>29</sup> The affects are first of all the

subject matter that the spiritual exercises—for instance, exercises for managing grief or anger—are aimed at. (This in fact is what animates Hadot's choice of the signifier "spiritual", as against "rational" or "cognitive"<sup>30</sup>). As Hadot comments in an interview:

What's interesting about the idea of a spiritual exercise is precisely that it is not a matter of purely rational consideration, but the putting in action of all kinds of means, intended to act upon oneself. *Imagination and affectivity play a capital role here*: we must represent to ourselves in vivid colours the dangers of such-and-such a passion, and use striking formulations of ideas in order to exhort ourselves. We must create habits and fortify ourselves by preparing against hardships in advance.<sup>31</sup>

Albert Camus, in his essay "Helen's Exile" had commented that ancient philosophy contains everything: "reason, nonsense, and myths", whereas modern philosophy keeps itself to reason or nonsense.<sup>32</sup> So too, Hadot repeatedly emphasises the importance of the imaginative rhetorical devices—like counter-factuals, imagined characters and dialogues, or the "view from above"—deployed by the ancient philosophers, in their attempts to shake their addressees out of habitual pre-philosophic ways of interpreting and experiencing. One of the reasons Hadot so admires Marcus Aurelius is that the author, trained in rhetoric, was a marvellous stylist. The emperor-philosopher both drew upon a set of standard Stoic imaginative figures, and developed several of his own, as means to find the most "striking, effective formula" to reactivate Stoic principles in his own mind.<sup>33</sup> In the *Veil of Isis*, we can be surprised to find Hadot arguing that the apparently distinctly modern privileging of aesthetic perception in romantic and vitalist reactions against mechanistic science and capitalist reification reactivates the imaginative exercises of what Hadot elsewhere calls practical physics:

Since antiquity, people had been aware of the degradation of perception brought about by habit and interest. In order to rediscover pure perception ... we must, says Lucretius ... "First of all, contemplate the clear, pure colour of the sky and all it contains within it: the stars wandering everywhere, the moon, the sun and its light with its incomparable brilliance: [as] if all these objects appeared to mortals today for the first time, if they appeared before the eyes suddenly and unexpectedly."<sup>34</sup>

However, the critical charge concerning the anaffectivity and other-worldiness of classical philosophy is primarily an evaluative one, rather than a false claim that classical philosophy had little to say on the affects and imagination. A rich affective life, we tend to hold, is a necessary part of psychological flourishing. Moreover, affects like love are the portals to the highest and most enduring pleasures, and the most meaningful connections with other human beings. Some negative or discomfiting affects, like guilt and shame, are surely amongst the greatest motivators to future goods. To strive for anything like Stoic *apatheia* seems as fundamentally inhumane and ethically wrong-headed to us, as it already did to Augustine, or differently Friedrich Nietzsche.

Let us then consider the Stoic account of affect one contemporary version of which has recently been defended very seriously by Martha Nussbaum, amongst others. The Stoics were psychological monists. While they did not deny affects involve physical transformations, they held that affects necessarily involved propositional beliefs about the world. More than this—at least after Chrysippus—the Stoics maintained that affects were sufficiently identifiable (i.e. their differentiating kind was given) as particular species of judgment. Each affective judgment, to specify, involved two propositional components: first, a subjective evaluation of some event or state of affairs, as good or bad; and second, what we would call a reflexive component, in which a certain response by the subject is adjudged appropriate, justified, or in order (*kathekon*). Desire for instance involves holding some future state of affairs (for instance, sexual intercourse) as a good, an evaluation which rationally justifies the individual pursuing that object. Fear, like desire, concerns some future state of affairs: but this time this state of affairs is deemed in some way bad; an evaluation which justifies fight, fright, or flight. Pleasure and pain by contrast involve things presently occurring; the first, perceived good experiences or states of affairs justifying elation, the second, as in mourning, jealousy, and regret, involving perceived ills which justify one's being upset. Seneca later added a third component to the Stoic account of affect: one in which the ruling faculty (what the Greek Stoics called the *hegemonikon*) is "carried away" (the Latin *efferantur*), and one forms the additional belief that

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doing anything it takes, “come what may” (*utique/ek pantos ge tropou*), to attain or avoid the object in question—as in blinding rage, also-known-as the propositional attitude “I’ll kill him, *come what may!*”<sup>35</sup>

As Brad Inwood stresses, the Stoic identification of affects with judgments—already ridiculed as unduly cognitive in the ancient world by the Platonist Galen, and Posidonius within their own school—unquestionably responds to the therapeutic origin and aim of the philosophy, stressed also by Hadot.<sup>36</sup> As in psychoanalytic and cognitive behavioural therapies today, if affects not only involve, but saliently *are*, judgments, this means they are amenable to discursive, philosophical therapy. In Stoic thought, while we cannot control the impressions, and even the involuntary “first movements” external events might provoke (including physiological reactions like erections), it remains in our power to give or withhold assent to the impulses our experience provokes. Philosophical exercises—what Hadot describes in terms of “intense meditation on fundamental dogmas, the ever-renewed awareness of the finitude of life, the examination of one’s conscience”<sup>37</sup>—aim to correct both the evaluative component involved in our affective response to things, and accordingly our assessment of which actions are appropriate for us to undertake (*ta kathekonta*). For the Stoics, that is—and Hadot claims this applies also to Epicureanism in the distinction between unnecessary and necessary desires—the passions involve false evaluative attitudes. This falsity is why they invariably engender unhappiness. They falsely represent things—pre-eminently money and bodily pleasures, and fame and social status—which are beyond our control, transient, indifferently distributed by nature to both good people and bad, and which are not sufficient for our attaining happiness, *as if* they were *essential* to our flourishing. To assent to the affects is then to assent to make one’s happiness a hostage to fortune, and guarantee one’s future rendezvous with forms of fear and pain. Stoicism does not advocate that the would-be sage wholly withdraws interest from all worldly goods and relations. Hadot cites Epictetus enjoining us to “eat like a man, drink like a man .... get married, have children, take part in civic life, learn how to put up with insults and tolerate other people.”<sup>38</sup> It does however prescribe *hypoexairesis*, an attitude of reserve, as we pursue these things: a reserve corresponding to an enlightened sense that they cannot deliver the *eudaimonia* we each aim for in pursuing them.

So, the critics’ question recurs: do not the ancients sanctify a form of philosophic life-denial or other-worldliness, and to the extent Hadot advocates a return to their modes of living, is he not complicit in this undesirable pursuit?

Hadot’s response to this question, as in fact Foucault’s came to be, is a many-sided: *no*. Ancient philosophy involves for him not a devaluation of this life, so much as what Nietzsche termed a revaluation of values. The withdrawal of our eudemonic attachments to money, status, and physical pleasures is answered by a refocused attachment to the circle of things we can each control: pre-eminently the assents and impulses of our own psyche, but also the manner in which we perform the actions we are at any given moment undertaking. The end of these philosophies, which are after all each eudemonic in orientation, is only *apatheia* in the sense that *pathos* here implies passivity or dependence, and hence spiritual *heterarchy*. For Epicurus, the highest end of philosophy is a now-philosophically-reformed species of pleasure, untroubled by fear over death (which is nothing to us), the uncertainty of the future, and regrets concerning the past (both of which lie beyond our present control). The Stoic sage attains to *eupatheia*, which involves a fitting joy (*chara*) in the awareness of one’s ethical progress, gladness (*euphrosune*) at the deeds and good fortune of the temperate, and a cheerfulness (*euthymia*) in accepting the order of the world, in which Nature has given us each, in our psyches, the means to attain happiness.<sup>39</sup>

This is why, in an essay which takes its title from Goethe, Hadot beautifully analyses the allegorical encounter between Faust and Helen in *The Second Faust* as emblematic of the species of experience he takes it that philosophy as a way of life is there to provoke. In this encounter, at the height of his overflowing love for Helen, representative of ancient beauty, Faust declares: “now the spirit looks not forward, nor behind. Only the present—”, and Helen completes the couplet for him “—is our happiness.”<sup>40</sup> The philosophical content of the thought here follows only from the fundamental Stoic *kephalaion* (leading principle) that it is not rational to worry about what we cannot alter—since it is, *ex hypothesi*, beyond our control. Its result is a teaching concerning the peculiar temporality of happiness: “a radical transformation, which must be active at each instant of life,

of mankind's attitude towards time."<sup>41</sup> "Two things must be cut short", Hadot quotes Seneca, "the fear of the future and the memory of past discomfort: the one does not concern me anymore, and the other does not concern me yet."<sup>42</sup> It also in this way corresponds to a very simple ontological truth: that the present is the only reality at any given time that is available to us, and in which we can think or act.<sup>43</sup> To focus only on transforming that small part of reality presently given to us is hence expressive of a fundamental assent to or affirmation of the world as we find it: this is the famous Stoic *amor fati* later reactivated by Nietzsche.<sup>44</sup> "And don't believe that [the sage] is content with not very much," Seneca cautions us, "for what he has is everything."<sup>45</sup> Hadot rejoins:

One could speak here of a mystical dimension to Stoicism. At each moment, and every instant, we must say "yes" to the universe, that is, to the will of universal reason. We must want what [this] universal reason wants: that is, the present instant, exactly as it is ..... Marcus, for his part, cries out: "I say to the universe: 'I love along with you.'"<sup>46</sup>

And we can see here how this *askesis* then is in fact intended to be profoundly liberating or life-affirming. As Marcus explains:

If you work at that which is before you, following right reason seriously, vigorously, calmly, without allowing anything else to distract you, but keeping the divine part pure as if you should be bound to give it back immediately; if you hold to this, expecting nothing, fearing nothing, but satisfied with the present activity according to nature, and with truth in every word and sound which you utter, you will live happy. And there is no man who is able to prevent this.<sup>47</sup>

Characteristically, Hadot finds this same spiritual attitude, in nearly identical terms, at the heart of Goethe's poetry, and his intellectual sensibility:

Would you model for yourself a pleasant life?  
Worry not about the past  
Let not anger get the upper hand  
Rejoice in the present without ceasing  
Hate no man  
And the future? Abandon it to god.<sup>48</sup>

Far from a longing for another world or life, indeed, Hadot stresses that it is more true to say that what is in play here is a focusing and intensifying of present experience, which the Stoics call *prosoche* (roughly, attention). If both Epicureanism and Stoicism hence encourage meditation on death, this is not out of any morbidity: and here Hadot chastens Spinoza, who otherwise owes so much to the Stoics. To constantly meditate upon the present possibility and eventual certainty one's death, and on the transience of world affairs, is rather to heighten our sense of the singular, irreplaceable uniqueness of each moment:

We not only can but we must be happy right now. The matter is urgent, for the future is uncertain, and death is a constant threat "while we're waiting to live, life passes by."<sup>49</sup>

Or, as Hadot cites Epicurus in the essay on "Spiritual Exercises":

We are born once, and cannot be born twice, but for all time must be no more. But you, who are not master of tomorrow, postpone your happiness; life is wasted in procrastination and each one of us dies overwhelmed with cares.<sup>50</sup>

Concerning others, and the anxiety that to pursue a philosophical way of life is to close ourselves off from genuine experiences of intersubjectivity, or accustom us to passively accept the injustices of the world, Hadot again urges us to contest this image. Unburdened by worries about past and future, unconditional commitments

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to alienable, perishable goods, or the sense that others could fundamentally harm us, the individual who has attained to a philosophical existence on this Hadotian model is, by his reckoning, going to become much *more*, not less available and open, to treat others in a just or benevolent manner. Focussed on the present, they will be more reasonably able to appraise what is politically possible, and to seize with presence of mind what the Stoics called the *kairos* or decisive moment for a particular action.<sup>51</sup> As Hadot details in *What is Ancient Philosophy?*,<sup>2</sup> central to each of the ancient philosophic schools are models of pedagogic practice and *philia*, not to mention competing understandings of the philosopher’s civic role—from the Platonic ambition to educate political leaders, to forms of political withdrawal (do no harm) characteristic of the Epicureans and the Cynics. The ancient schools each, certainly, opposed pitying the suffering of non-philosophers. But this was not out of an absence of fellow feeling, nor does it commit them to accepting injustice without protest. Rather, it was out of a philosophical awareness of people’s common, innate rational capacities, and with it their active capacity to see and pursue what is truly conducive to happiness which they, again like Nietzsche, saw compromised by the tendency to pityingly objectify the other as wholly a victim. What will be required in different cases, depending on the context and audience, are the different species of speech act which the different ancient texts in fact practice: “exhortation, reprimands, consolation, instruction.”<sup>52</sup> Hadot closes *What is Ancient Philosophy?* with the repeated emphasis:

We must never forget that ancient philosophical life was always intimately linked to the care of others, and that this demand is inherent in the philosophical life ... The philosopher is cruelly aware of his solitude and impotence in a world torn between two states of unconsciousness: the idolatry of money and the suffering of billions of human beings. In such conditions, the philosopher will surely never be able to attain the absolute serenity of the sage ... But ancient philosophy also teaches us not to resign ourselves, but to continue to act reasonably and try to live according to the norm constituted by the Idea of wisdom, whatever happens, and even if our actions seem very limited to us. In the words of Marcus Aurelius: “Do not wait for Plato’s *Republic*, but be happy if one little thing leads to progress and reflect on the fact that what results from such a little thing is not, in fact, so very little.”<sup>53</sup>

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Pierre Hadot was by all accounts that, very rare, combination his thought concerning the nature of ancient philosophy prescribes: a man of great learning who was yet “discrete, almost self-effacing.”<sup>54</sup> In this piece, we have wanted to offer a small, discursive or critical tribute to his work and legacy. We have now raised the two greatest hesitations that it seem to us oppose Hadot’s project of reanimating the ancient philosophic ideals. In addressing the anxiety that ancient philosophy is anaffective and life-denying, we have also aimed to bring out what seems to us the most provocative of Hadot’s claims: that the ancient philosophical comportments represent fundamental, eudemonistic possibilities for human beings, across culture and time. The fundamental attitude of Hadot’s ancient philosopher, we have seen, is not one of self-denial, or the wish to escape from this life, in all its misery and its splendour. It is a reevaluation of one’s way of being in and seeing the world, premised on a very small number of orienting rational principles: notably the Stoic distinctions between what does or does not depend on us, or the Epicurean distinctions between natural, necessary and unnecessary desires. It is this provocative set of claims that underlie Hadot’s claim for the relative independence of ancient philosophic *askseisis* from the metaphysics which served in the old schools to frame them—and so for their potential availability as existential options for modern men and women.

This paper does not pretend to have raised or addressed all of the potential issues that arise, concerning either the exegetical accuracy of Hadot’s reconstruction of the ancients, his (arguably problematic) commitment to a syncretic single notion of one “ancient philosophy”, or the wider, contemporary significance of his ethical thought. In a period when the revealed religions are claiming a monopoly on substantive axiological discourse, and the pressing need to re-evaluate the modern Western attitude towards nature is becoming more evident every day, the ancient naturalistic ethical perspectives Hadot’s work allows us so clearly to see seem extremely timely. Great now is the need, not by giving up, but by reshaping reason, to recapture that “profound feeling of

participation in and identification with a reality which transcends the limits of the individual.”<sup>55</sup> which Pierre Hadot positions at the heart of ancient Western philosophy. For, in the words of the modern author, Goethe, whom Hadot most often cited as, like himself “half Stoic and half Epicurean”<sup>56</sup>: “Great is the joy of existence, and greater yet we feel in the presence of the world.”<sup>57</sup>

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### NOTES

1. In what follows references to books by Pierre Hadot will be given in brackets, via the following abbreviations: PWL= Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, edited with an introduction by Arnold L. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (London: Blackwell 1998); VI = Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, trans. Michael Chase (Harvard University Press, 2006); WAP = Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (Harvard University Press, 2002); IC = Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).
2. WAP, 174.
3. PWL, 268.
4. See: Martha Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
5. PWL, 83.
6. Plato, *Apology*. 30a-b
7. WAP, 74.
8. WAP, 274.
9. PWL, 271.
10. WAP, 260.
11. WAP, 275.
12. WAP, 278.
13. PWL, 25.
14. PWL, 208. It has been pointed out by an anonymous reviewer of this paper that Hadot’s distancing of his position on Foucault, by suggesting in this way the proximity of Foucault’s “ancients” to a modern aesthetic dandyism, is in addition called into question by Foucault’s last emphasis in *The Government of Self and Others* lectures on *parrhesia*, truth-telling in the face of potential political risk. Such an emphasis, certainly, reflects the tension between the joy or pleasure Hadot like Foucault sees as associated with philosophical *praxis* (see eg Aurelius, *Meditations* XII, 8) and the demands of the philosophical commitment to truth. It also mitigates against Hadot’s suggestion that Foucault’s last ethics represent a form of modern hedonism in ancient clothing. We cannot consider this issue here, but for a comparative study of Foucault’s and Hadot’s reading of the ancients, see Thomas Flynn, “Philosophy as a Way of Life: Foucault and Hadot”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 31, No. 5-6, pp. 609-622.
15. Here as elsewhere one might propose the lasting effect of Christian culture upon our modern sensibilities. Perhaps the most devastating critic of the ancient philosophers, awake to philosophy’s status as a competitor way of life to the new faith, comes from Augustine: “And I am at a loss to understand how the Stoic philosophers can presume to say that these are no ills, though at the same time they allow the wise man to commit suicide and pass out of this life if they become so grievous that he cannot or ought not to endure them. . . . that they can become happy by their own resources, that their wise man, or at least the man whom they fancifully depict as such, is always happy, even though he become blind, deaf, dumb, mutilated, racked with pains, or suffer any conceivable calamity such as may compel him to make away with himself; and they are not ashamed to call the life that is beset with these evils happy . . .” Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, XIV.4
16. PWL, 274.
17. PWL, 83.
18. WAP, 115.
19. WAP, 127.
20. e.g.: PWL, 283.
21. WAP, 275.
22. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (*Ta Eis Eauton*) IX.28
23. Aurelius, *Meditations*, IV.27
24. Aurelius, *Meditations*, XII.14
25. For instance, PWL 229: “Moral good for the Stoics—the only good there is—has a cosmic dimension: it is the harmonisation of the reason within us with the reason which guides the cosmos, and produces the chain

of causes and effects which shapes our fate. At each moment, we must harmonise our judgment, action and desires with universal reason.”

26. *PWL*, 278.

27. *PWL*, 273/108.

28. *PWL*, 108.

29. See: Stephen K. Strange, “The Stoics on the Voluntariness of the Passions,” in *Stoicism Traditions and Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 30-51; Lawrence C. Becker, “Stoic Emotions”, in *Stoicism: Traditions and Transformations*, 250-276; Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, esp. Chapters 1 and 13; Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace Of Mind From Stoic Agitation To Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000), 93-157; also, on the modern debates: Paul Redding, *The Logic of Affect* (USA: Cornell, 1999), chapter 1; and Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought* (Edinburgh: Cambridge University Press 2000), 56-63 & 89-138.

30. *PWL*, 81-82.

31. *PWL*, 284. Italics added.

32. Albert Camus, “Helen’s Exile”, in *Selected Essays and Notebooks*, trans. Philip Thody (London: Penguin, 1979).

33. *IC*, 313.

34. *VI*, 212-213.

35. Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace Of Mind*, 61.

36. Brad Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 130-131. In particular, Inwood stresses the desire to assign responsibility to affective experience, and to situate the account of affects in a wider view of human action.

37. *PWL*, 268.

38. *PWL*, 267.

39. For a good account of the *eupatheia* in Stoicism, see for instance: Margaret Graver, *Stoicism and Emotions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 51-55 & 58-59.

40. *PWL*, 218.

41. *PWL*, 223.

42. *PWL*, 228.

43. *PWL*, 229 & 268.

44. In fact, as Hadot shows, this thought condenses several sets of claims. These include the thought that happiness cannot be divided and is whole at any one moment; just as Aristotle had maintained concerning pleasure in books VII and X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*; also the thought of the theoretical interconnection of all things (*PWL* 229), as in the Epicurean critique of fear of invisible powers who could supposedly interrupt the order of nature; and also, more obscurely, a sense that somehow everything or the whole of nature is yet present in any one moment. (*PWL* 228-231)

45. *PWL*, 228.

46. *PWL*, 230.

47. Aurelius, *Meditations*, IV.12.

48. Goethe “Rule of Life,” at *PWL*, 231.

49. *PWL*, 229. Eg: “We must carry out each action of our lives as if it were our last.” Aurelius *Meditations*. 2, 5, *PWL* 23. As Hadot notes, this line of thinking is of course retaken up by Martin Heidegger’s thought on authenticity in *Being and Time* division II.

50. Epicurus, at *PWL* 88; See: Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, III, 957-60.

51. *PWL*, 221.

52. *WAP*, 217. Hadot confesses that he cannot help but admire as exemplary Marcus’ description of how we ought to address someone who has acted badly: “Not chiding him and making him feel we are putting up with him, but with frankness and goodness ... with gentleness, without irony, not reproachfully but with affection, and a heart exempt from bitterness—not as if we were in school, nor in order to be admired by some bystander, but truly person to person, even if others are standing nearby.” *WAP*, 219.

53. *WAP*, 280-281.

54. Needless to say, it is too soon to give a definitive evaluation of Hadot’s thought, and only the future will verify, or fail to verify, Roger-Pol Droit’s judgment on him: “discrete, almost self-effacing, this singular thinker

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might well be, in a sense, one of the influential men of our epoch.” Michael Chase, “Remembering Pierre Hadot”, *Hadot University Press Blog*, [http://harvardpress.typepad.com/hup\\_publicity/2010/04/remembering-pierre-hadot-part-2.html](http://harvardpress.typepad.com/hup_publicity/2010/04/remembering-pierre-hadot-part-2.html).

55. *PWL*, 234.

56. *PWL*, 230.

57. *PWL*, 234.