

Philosophy as a Way of Life

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In the very act of philosophizing, any philosophizing, should it not come, unwitting or not, to articulating a way of life? Is it not also dependent on being a form of life? Is this form of life which is also a way of life also *necessarily* discursive? Is philosophizing necessarily a discursive activity? Or is it not crucial, discursive or not, that philosophy be treated as discourse? Can philosophy be an unsayable something, we know not what? It is a crucial, unsayable or not, something that is lived, a way of being. *But what, if anything, is living philosophically?* Do we have any understanding of that? Is there anything we must just be to be a philosopher or to be philosophical? So that we could say about him or her, "They are going or have gone philosophical"?

Is there really a way of living philosophically? Some of Shakespeare's characters are made to think that could be so. And they do not seem to feel puzzled about its coherence. There seems to be now in this post-Socratic age that it is no longer thought to be coherent or to be a non-foolish thing to do or try to be. There is by now, and for a long time, the view that this is a non-starter. There is no way of *living* that is essentially and unavoidably philosophical. There is no way of living a philosophical life. But here we have a crucial historical sea change concerning philosophy from what it was for the ancient Greeks and Romans where there was such a thing as living philosophically. But, as Pierre Hadot makes

clear, from the time of Scholastics, attainment of philosophy in the Middle Ages with what was later called, albeit ethnocentrically, the perennial philosophy, clearly showed itself in the Middle Ages to be an innovative philosophy that unobtrusively set aside a longstanding way of looking at philosophy going way back to Socrates. Philosophy for the Scholastics, instead of remaining Socratic, became *a theory rather than being a way of living, a form of life as it was for Socrates* and for other philosophers of the ancient western world. Philosophy came to be instead with the Scholastics something that would involve having and using adeptly a reflective discourse. It would no longer be a way of living. Being philosophical was being able to discourse in a certain way that was intellectually (cognitively) thought to be illuminating and thought to be potentially emancipatory. And to reason in such a way that discursive ability was a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for being philosophical. To be sufficient it would have to articulate a coherent view of reality. Philosophy became a matter of having different views rather than being a way of living. It would no longer be necessary to be philosophical to live in a certain way. There would no longer be something that would constitute living *the*, or even living *a*, philosophical life. What instead is philosophical is the ability to discourse and reason philosophically and to have the disposition to do so. To go philosophical would be to clearly set out an emancipatory conception of the world, to articulate a rational worldview. Philosophy became theoretical with the Scholastics as something to articulate clearly and defend rationally. That is to articulate a rational conception of the world.

Philosophers now would laugh at or scorn the very idea of the Socratic endeavor of living *the*, or *a*, philosophical life. There is no, and has not been for a long time except in mythology or pretentious or ignorant protestation, such a thing as being a seer or a sage

living *the* philosophical life or even *a* philosophical life. Philosophy for we moderns, if we go in for it at all, is a distinctively discursive activity, a certain kind of learning and understanding, but it is not, as it was essentially for the ancients, a certain kind of being, a certain way of living. There is now no such thing as living *the* or even *a* philosophical life. (Perhaps there was never such a thing except in unwitting ideology. Someone who gained the truth became captive of an ideology.) Philosophy *may* sometimes, and sometimes even crucially, be a *theory* about how to live. And that can even be taught by philosophers or even by philosophy teachers no longer aspiring to be philosophers and people, philosophers or not, may reason in accordance with their learning. But this may not be to be doing philosophy. But there is no such thing as living *the*, or *a*, philosophical life. There is no such thing as belonging to the clan of lovers of wisdom. We can learn to reason philosophically, though what this is varies over space and time, but there is no such thing as learning to live philosophically or to live *the* or *a* philosophical life. Moreover, there is no consensus about what it is to be a lover of wisdom, though there is some consensus or even a clear conception about what it is to be irrational or reasonable, though for the latter less than is usually thought. And perhaps we cannot escape being just or thoroughly historicist about these matters.

However, Hadot contends with impressive evidence that for the ancient Greeks and Romans that their philosophers, said to be lovers of wisdom, believed that philosophy was a way of life. That that was their central endeavor as philosophers. They were concerned fundamentally to live that life. They didn't even deny that they needed to have a conception of what it was to live in that way, but the crucial concern was to actually live in that way. Something that in order for them to be philosophical they had to be in their actual living. It

could not just be to be concerned with such things in their discoursing including, of course, their reflective discoursing. *Moreover, for them any serious discoursing, including philosophical discoursing, was instrumental to living a philosophical life.* That way of living as a lover of wisdom was for them the aim of philosophy. It is what philosophy is, ancient intellectuals had it. (Still, would they not have to have some idea of how to do it to be able to do it?)

Since these ancients, the world, including the philosophical world, has changed a lot. Hadot well realizes that philosophy is no longer what it was for the ancients. But he believes that there are still echoes of it and some of them should be in some way preserved. But we must realize that it has been absent, or nearly so, for a very long time. I surmise that Hadot deplores this and would welcome, but hardly expect, it in some form to return. But that is just my surmise about Hadot. He doesn't say so but he makes impressive efforts to show what it once was and to make it attractive to us.

Our modern way of seeing philosophy was not what it was for ancient Greek and Roman philosophers or for Arab philosophers under the influence of Aristotle. The modern way is not how they saw philosophy. For them to be philosophical was to be in training for wisdom. It, as we have seen, was something for them to be, not just to know. It was to live the philosophical life. It was about how to live and then to live it, or at least try to. Philosophical knowledge was instrumental to that. But centrally for them, philosophy was not a theoretical affair but a way of acting and being. It was to attain wisdom and that was to live in a certain way.

For the ancients the life of Socrates was paradigmatic. For them, as for Socrates, *to philosophize was to learn how to live and only incidentally and instrumentally to learn how to*

theorize; even to theorize about how to live. How to live was the thing. Discoursing for the philosophers was entirely instrumental to that. That was so for the ancient philosophers, the inventors of philosophy. Pierre Hadot well argues that with the invention of Scholasticism in the Middle Ages such a conception of philosophy came to an end. The falsely called First Philosophy or Perennial Philosophy, was neither first philosophy nor perennial at all. It put to an end the ancient conception of philosophy which preceded it. With the Scholastics philosophy became a way of theorizing in a certain way. A way of discoursing. It came to be taken after a time that there is no such thing as living a philosophical life. Philosophy became a way of theorizing and not a way of living.

There are ways of being philosophical that have gone in various ways since the pre-Socratics, to Socrates, to Plato, to Aristotle, to Abelard, to Aquinas, to Kant, to Hume, to Reid, to Dewey, to Quine, to Wittgenstein, to Austin, to Rorty which make it clear to us now that there is no such thing as the nature or essence of philosophy or even, as Berlin once thought, *the task* of philosophy. The idea that there is such a thing as living the philosophical life has gone out of business since Medieval Scholasticism. It now makes no more sense to speak of living the philosophical life than to speak of living the chemical life, the biological life, the mathematical life, the dramatist life, the technological life or the computorial life. Yet there are chemists, biologists, mathematicians, dramatists, technologists, computer specialists galore. And there is a way of characterizing what they do. But in each instance it makes no sense to speak of living the life of them. But by contrast there was something of that for pre-medieval philosophers, the pre-Socratic philosophers aside (they were more like very primitive natural scientists). But aside from them, for pre-Medieval philosophers there was a living of *the*, or at least *a*, philosophical life. But with the arrival of the Scholastics in the

Middle Ages it no longer made sense to speak of living the, or a, philosophical life. That faded away as did the idea of a philosopher being a sage or a seer or even a mystic. *Philosophy became a theoretical affair. Sometimes* a theoretical affair about how to live but still a *theory* about how to live, not a *training in how to live*. There were no spiritual exercises to that end. From the triumph of Scholastics to present day philosophy we have come to have with philosophy something that has somehow been taken to be a theoretical affair. Sometimes a very bad one, but still a theoretical affair. Even the obscurantists thought they had a philosophical theory.

Perhaps Hadot thinks that it is now impossible to come again to have anything like the ancient view of philosophy and he sticks to a historian's task of showing what it once was and showing wistfully its attractions. But not foolishly endorsing what can no longer be. However, *perhaps* he believes that a modernized something of some importance in ways like the Socratic ways is still possible? And perhaps he should be taken to attempting to argue for an attempt to make it so. I shall go on in my account on the assumption that is the way we should understand him. He, like Foucault, sets out to offer humankind a model of life (Hadot 1995, 208). Perhaps a model that is not just in our dreams.

Hadot describes "ancient philosophy as an art, style or a way of life" (Hadot 206). He goes on to explain "how modern philosophy has forgotten this tradition and had become almost an entirely theoretical discourse" (Hadot 206). But that, he seems to believe, diminishes the importance of philosophy. Undermines its importance.

The former ubiquity of philosophy as an art and form of living with its conception of there being a philosophical life did not change through the entire course of antiquity. Hadot, as we have seen, contends plausibly that the sea change occurred during the Middle Ages

and continued on in modern times. Christianity, he maintains, had a considerable role to play in this change. It once portrayed itself as a philosophy in the ancient sense. There is, that is, a Christian way of life. But we must also remember that across time philosophers, Christian and otherwise, came to believe that to philosophize was to live in accordance with “the law of reason”. Even Christian philosophers thought that to philosophize was a way of living in accordance with “the law of reason”, with “the law of the Logos”, that is, of divine reason, whatever that is. Something we know not what. There still were in certain quarters spiritual exercises but they were no longer to be philosophical or to be for training to be philosophical.

The Gospels, it was thought by some, must be taken as a Christian’s philosophical treatise or somewhat more plausibly, as Scholasticism sank in, as being in accordance with philosophical treatises as well as being *philosophical spiritual exercises*, an essential part of the philosophy of the ancients. These spiritual exercises must be integrated into Christianity if Christianity was to be taken to be a philosophy in the old sense. Something that initially became part of the worldview of Christians in the Middle Ages. Something that was also, strangely, taken to be a life in accordance with reason. But as the Middle Ages sank in, the relevant spiritual exercises were no longer taken to be a part of philosophy.

However, in the Middle Ages philosophy, as Hadot points out, was “no longer the supreme science but became the servant of theology; it supplied theology (revealed theology) with all the conceptual, logical, physical and metaphysical materials it needed to make its case. The Faculty of Arts came to be no more than a preparation for the Faculty of Theology” (Hadot 270).

This explains the sea change of philosophy. Philosophy became “a purely theoretical and abstract activity” (Hadot 270). Something of instrumental value for a way of living. It was no longer itself a way of life. Spiritual exercises were no longer a part of philosophy but became integrated into Christian spirituality.

Hadot goes on to observe some things that some radical thinkers have taken to as well, namely how philosophy has become *university-ized*. Namely, to be something that is practiced almost exclusively by professors and their students in universities. The university, Hadot notes, “is made up of professors who train professors, or professionals training professionals. *Education was thus no longer to be directed toward people who were to be educated with a view of becoming fully developed human beings but instead to be specialists who trained other specialists*” (Hadot 270).

Hadot goes on to observe that “the scholastic university [usually Thomist] dominated by theology functioned in that way up to the end of the eighteenth century. It was still functioning that way when I went to a Catholic college in 1945. However, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, genuinely creative philosophical activity would develop *outside* the university. Descartes, Spinoza and Leibnitz were not professors. They were not linked to universities. Philosophy thus reconquered its autonomy vis-à-vis theology but this movement—born as a reaction against Scholasticism—was situated on the same terrain as the latter. In opposition to one kind of theoretical discourse, there arose yet another theoretical discourse. In either case, philosophy lost its Greco-Roman *existential* function as *a way of living and being*. It became a purely theoretical activity. It was no longer thought to be a way of living. We could no longer properly speak of living a philosophical life. The conception of a philosopher as a sage, seer or even of someone training for wisdom

disappeared. And this has remained so. Imagine asking Russell, Ayer, Quine or Austin 'What kind of philosophical life do you live?' It even would be off to ask it of Bosenquat, Bradley, Karl Jaspers or of Hans-Georg Gadamer but perhaps less so of Heidegger.

Philosophy was no longer thought to be a method of spiritual progress which required and indeed called for a radical conversion and transformation of the individual's way of living and being. It no longer had anything like spiritual exercises. But for the Greeks and the Romans philosophy was a way of life in its exercise and as an effort to achieve wisdom. It is what Hadot calls philosophy's *existential* goal. This goal was wisdom itself; the Shangri-La of any lover of wisdom. A philosopher of the Greco-Roman ancient vintage was necessarily a lover of wisdom. Philosophy for the Greeks and the Romans of the ancient epoch did not only enable us to know certain fundamental things about the universe or, more accurately and primitively, of the fundamental stuff. We learn instead to come to know certain things about how to live and how to be able to do it. These ancient philosophies aimed to teach us and to enable us to take the philosophers' way. (This, of course, assumes there is one.) It was believed in Greco-Roman cultures that one is a philosopher if one lives in a certain way. Being philosophical, they believed, was a way of living not a way of theorizing. Not even *theorizing* about how to live. Any theorizing that goes on is purely instrumental to achieving a way of living. The philosopher as conceived *may* not be able to say what philosophy is. He may not be able to say what it is to take a philosophical point of view or to have a rationale or theory for so acting. He may not be able to write a philosophical treatise or an article or give a lecture or make a philosophical argument, but if he lives in a certain way, he is a philosopher and he may well try to show others how to live philosophically as a true lover of wisdom. But, for a jarring note, could there be a Socrates

without arguments? Could a philosopher act but not be able to discourse? Ancient or otherwise?

But still, discursive capabilities or not, they can somehow be said to be living the, or a, philosophical life without being able to characterize it. *It is the doing of it that counts.* (But can it be that they can have no theories at all and still live a philosophical life? Was this true for any of the ancients? Even the skeptics?) Wittgenstein once said in the beginning was the deed not the word. This being may be in a certain way what the ancients took to be the task and the goal of philosophy. But Wittgensteinian or not, it sounds at least untoward. But be that as it may, philosophy ceased to be that at all and with universities it became the task of producing philosophers skilled at a certain kind of theoretical practice and skilled in certain kinds of argumentation. The goal became to produce such philosophers. It was no longer to train people in the quest for wisdom and how to live in a certain way. Wittgenstein sought instead to take people out of philosophy by conceptually therapizing people out of philosophy. But he actually, but not intentionally, helped produced philosophers adept at the linguistic turn or at least one form of it. Hadot, by contrast, calls for an *existentialist* turn in philosophy. It does not just teach us how to live but more crucially it generates such action. We come to live in a philosophical way. It is not just, if at all, a matter of theory but a matter of action. We can take the philosophers' way—the classical way—without knowing that it is philosophy we are doing. A teacher of philosophy of the ancient mode may not know how to teach one what it is that will yield an understanding of how to live but he can by his actions show what that living is. His actions can exemplify it without his being able to articulate it, or clearly to. Neither the philosopher nor their trainee may become such articulators. We can *perhaps* learn how to do something without actually doing it. What is crucial, these

ancients had it, was that to be philosophical was to live the philosophical life. The ability to articulate or theorize about it is secondary; instrumental but not required for the philosophical life. It is because of this that Hadot has called philosophy, or at least proper philosophy, *existential*. What is essential for him philosophically is knowing *how* to live, not our ability to articulate what it is—just as you can drive a car without being able to say how to do it—though this is not to say that philosophy cannot be articulated or that it is not sometimes valuable to articulate it. But that for the ancients was not essential. What was essential was living the philosophical life.

There is no mysticism here in spite of Hadot's propensities. For the ancients, studying philosophy does not just, or necessarily at all, teach us philosophical doctrines but to live a philosophical life. Sometimes it is also to generate or enable the living of the philosophical life in others. It leads us to live the philosophical life, to take the *philosophenweg*. It is not just, or perhaps even at all, a knowledge of certain principles or doctrines that we must adopt to aid us in taking such a path. It is the taking of the path whether it is a matter of knowledge or not. (But again, a jarring note: how could it be possible to live philosophically without understanding at all what we were doing to be philosophical?) Still, Hadot has it, it is not a matter of having a knowledge of principles or otherwise or being able to articulate certain beliefs or to state that we have certain practices or a form of life that is necessary to do philosophy or to be philosophical or to understand what it is, but that we act in a certain way. That is what it is to live a philosophical life. It can be articulated but it need not be articulated or be articulable by someone who is living a philosophical life. They may not be able to articulate it to live the philosophical life or to be onto this ancient conception a philosopher. Again it is the action that counts, not the articulating of it. (But again, a jarring note: could it

be utterly un-articulable?) Philosophy, the ancients, the creators of philosophy had it, was not just, or perhaps at all, a matter of knowing or understanding how to articulate what being philosophical is, but the crucial thing is to be living the philosophical life. Such a life is a role model for our living in a philosophical way. But this is not Don Quixote-like to live in the clouds but Sancho Panza-like to have a philosophical life with one's feet on the ground. It is not our knowing but our being that is crucial.

Philosophy on the ancient conception is not just philosophical discourse or even any discoursing at all or even being a theoretical matter, but to be, to live, in a certain way and this way is not just or even at all a theoretical matter but to live a certain kind of life. This way of life, as with the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Platonists and the Aristotelians or the Skeptics who were exemplifications of a philosophical life. The crucial thing for a philosopher is to live one way or another of these philosophical ways, not to articulate one or another of them or even be able to do so. Any of those kinds of things among the ancients was crucially taught by exemplification as a way of life that brought peace of mind, inner freedom and cosmic consciousness. Philosophy for the ancients presented itself as a therapy intended to cure human beings of their inquietudes. But whether they had such articulations or not, if they had peace of mind, inner freedom, a cosmic consciousness, they were living the philosophical life with or without theory or understanding. This is a way of taking things that is at a great distance from what philosophy has become.

We must distinguish, Hadot claims, philosophical discourse from philosophy itself. The Stoics in particular stressed that. But we also must not, of course, take all discoursing to be philosophical discoursing. But to say that philosophy is not discoursing itself is another matter. Moreover, it is important to say what when it is discoursing is distinctively

philosophical discoursing. While Hadot did not think all philosophy was discoursing and that there was a deep difference that we have noticed following Hadot between on the one hand Hellenistic and Roman thought and some Arab philosophy and on the other hand what we have noted from what philosophy came to be, including the philosophy that we now have. Still, while all of ancient philosophy was not necessarily discursive, some of it, indeed most of it, was, though discoursing was not its central aim.

In the Hellenistic and Roman epochs, Hadot contends, “philosophy was a mode of existing-in-the-world, which had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual’s life” (Hadot 265). In that way philosophy was not about ways of life but itself was a way of life. For the ancients “the mere word *philosophia*—the love of wisdom—was enough to express this conception of philosophy” (Hadot 265). Hadot writes concerning the ancients that philosophy that took on the form of an exercise of the thought will have the totality of one’s being as its central concern, the goal of which will be a state practically inaccessible to humankind, namely wisdom. Philosophy was for the Greeks and the Romans of classical times a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual’s way of life both in its exercise and as an effort to achieve wisdom. Its goal was wisdom itself. A philosopher, for the ancients, the Skeptics included, was necessarily a lover of wisdom. Philosophy, for the ancient Greeks and Romans, does not just enable us to know but as well and more centrally and essentially enables us *to be* in a certain way. This way of life, as I have just remarked, brought peace of mind, inner freedom and a cosmic consciousness.

There is a great gulf between what and how philosophical thought is now and what it was thought by the ancients to be. Since the early Middle Ages concerning what it is to

philosophize or what it is to be a philosopher. For the ancients, or at least for the Greek, Roman and Arab ancients, when it comes to philosophy what is crucial is that philosophy is concerned centrally with how to live a philosophical life. For us, when it comes to philosophy it is how we conceptualize and discourse, how we conceive of things, which crucially counts.

Hadot puts it for the ancients. “We find in all philosophical schools the same concern about and recognition of the possibility of and the importance of human beings freeing themselves from everything which is alien to them, even if, as in the case of the Sceptics, it comes to a mere refusal to make any decision” (Hadot 266). Discourse about philosophy is for them not the same thing as philosophy. *Philosophical theories, the ancients agreed, are in the service of the philosophical life.* Philosophers, for them, do not seek to give a total systematic explanation of the whole of reality or indeed any part of it. Rather, its doctrines and principles should be perspicuously instrumental in providing people with a sense of how to live and a disposition to do so. That is to be a sage. Hadot goes on to remark that “as a matter of fact when we reflect on what the philosophical life implies, we realize there is an abyss between philosophical theory and philosophizing as living action” (Hadot 268). That is to be sagely.

That is something that is very distant from what we have now as well as it was also distant from what philosophy was in Aquinas’s time, Hume’s time, Reid’s time, Kant’s time, Hegel’s time, Russell’s time. “Philosophy in the Hellenistic and Greek period took on the form of a way of life, an art of living, a way of being” (Hadot 268). Not just a way or a kind of knowing or conceptualizing or articulating.

During Hellenistic and Roman eras philosophy comes clearly to the forefront as a way of life (Hadot 265). Hadot takes this to mean that “philosophy was a mode of existing-in-the-

world which had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual's life" (Hadot 265). Ancient philosophers had it that philosophers were lovers of wisdom and were in training for wisdom even if there were doubts about whether any of them could ever finish their training. But wisdom, however elusive, was still their goal and that would consist in a certain way of living and being. Real wisdom does not merely enable us to know but—and this is what is crucial—to make us to live in a certain way. Many of these ancient philosophers thought that no philosopher (no sage or seer) or anyone else had yet found wisdom or had ever lived a life in accordance with wisdom, but many ancient philosophers continued to teach what they took to be the precepts of wisdom, though it is perplexing how they could do so if they did not understand at all what having wisdom would be. Still, having some empathetic understanding of these precepts concerning wisdom was thought to bring peace of mind and inner freedom. Philosophy, first and foremost, as Hadot put it, "presented itself as a therapeutic, intended to cure mankind's anguish" (Hadot 265-66). But being philosophical, as they had it, the living the life of a philosopher, was not the same as engaging in philosophical discourse, investigations or argument. Philosophy and philosophical discourse are not the same thing. Hadot well articulates this view, giving us a sense of what philosophy once was and is no longer. Is it *only* of historical interest? Have we anything to learn and take to head and to heart here? Hadot certainly thinks so. Can this reasonably be ignored?

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