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Introduction

Michael Chase

The Life of Pierre Hadot

Pierre Hadot, Professor Emeritus of Hellenistic and Roman Thought at the Collège de France and Director of Studies at the Fifth Section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études, died on the night of April 24–25, 2010, at the age of 88.

Born in Paris in 1922, Hadot was raised at Reims, where he received a strict Catholic education, and was ordained to the priesthood in 1944. But he soon became disenchanted with the Church, particularly after the conservative encyclical *Humani Generis* of August 12, 1950, and he left it in 1952 (Eros also played a role in this decision: Hadot married his first wife in 1953).

Now employed as a researcher at the National Center of Scientific Research (CNRS), Hadot was free to devote himself to scholarship. He began with Latin Patristics, editing Ambrose of Milan and Marius Victorinus. This was the period, from the late 1950s to the 1960s, when, under the guidance of such experts as the Jesuit Paul Henry, he learned the strict discipline of philology, or the critical study and editing of ancient manuscripts, an approach that was to continue to exert a formative

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influence on his thought for the rest of his life. Also during this period, Hadot's deep interest in mysticism led him to study Plotinus and, surprisingly enough, Wittgenstein, whose comments on "das Mystische" (*Tractatus* 6.522) led Hadot to study the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* and publish articles on them, thus becoming one of the first people in France to draw attention to Wittgenstein (reedited as Hadot 2004). Hadot wrote *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision* (Hadot 1993) in a month-long burst of inspiration in 1963, a lucid, sincere work that is still one of the best introductions to Plotinus. Hadot would continue to translate and comment upon Plotinus throughout the rest of his life, founding in particular *Les Écrits de Plotin*, a series, still in progress, that provides translations with extensive introductions to and commentaries on all the treatises of Plotinus' *Enneads*, in chronological order.¹ On a personal level, however, Hadot gradually became detached from Plotinus' thought, feeling that Plotinian mysticism was too otherworldly and contemptuous of the body to be adequate for today's needs. As he tells the story, when he emerged from the month-long seclusion he had imposed upon himself to write *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*, he went to the corner bakery, and "seeing the ordinary folks all around me in the bakery, I [...] had the impression of having lived a month in another world, completely foreign to our world, and worse than this – totally unreal and even unlivable" (Hadot 2011, p. 137).

Elected Director of Studies at the Fifth Section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in 1964, Hadot married his second wife, the historian of philosophy Ilsetraut Marten, in 1966. This marked another turning point in his intellectual development, for it was at least in part thanks to his wife's interest in spiritual guidance in Antiquity that the focus of Hadot's interests would gradually shift, over the following decade or so, from the complex and technical metaphysics of Porphyry and Marius Victorinus to a concern for the practical, ethical side of philosophy, and more precisely the development of his key concept of philosophy as a way of life.

At Hadot's request, the title of his Chair at the EPHE Ve was soon changed from "Latin Patristics" to "Theologies and Mysticism of Hellenistic Greece and the End of Antiquity." In 1968, he published his thesis for the State doctorate, the massive *Porphyre et Victorinus* (Hadot 1968; 1971), in which he attributed a previously anonymous commentary on Plato's *Parmenides* to Porphyry, the Neoplatonic student of Plotinus. This monument of erudition arguably remains, even today, the most complete exposition of Neoplatonic metaphysics.

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It was around this time that Pierre Hadot began to study and lecture on Marcus Aurelius – studies that would culminate in his edition of the *Meditations*,² left unfinished at his death, and especially in his book *The Inner Citadel* (Hadot 1998). Under the influence of his wife Ilsetraut, who had written an important work on spiritual guidance in Seneca (Hadot 1969), Hadot now began to accord more and more importance to the idea of spiritual exercises, that is, philosophical practices intended to transform the practitioner’s way of looking at the world and consequently his or her way of being. Following Paul Rabbow, Hadot held that the famous *Exercitia Spiritualia* of Ignatius of Loyola, far from being exclusively Christian, were the direct heirs of pagan Greco-Roman practices. These exercises, involving not just the intellect or reason, but all of a human being’s faculties, including emotion and imagination, had the same goal as all ancient philosophy: reducing human suffering and increasing happiness, by teaching people to detach themselves from their particular, egocentric, individualistic viewpoints and become aware of their belonging, as integral component parts, to the Whole constituted by the entire cosmos. In its fully developed form, exemplified in such late Stoics as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, this change from our particularistic perspective to the universal perspective of reason had three main aspects. First, by means of the discipline of thought, we are to strive for objectivity; since, as the Stoics believe, what causes human suffering is not so much things in the world, but our beliefs about those things, we are to try to perceive the world as it is in itself, without the subjective coloring we automatically tend to ascribe to everything we experience (“That’s lovely,” “that’s horrible,” “that’s ugly,” “that’s terrifying,” etc.). Second, in the discipline of desire, we are to attune our individual desires with the way the universe works, not merely accepting that things happen as they do, but actively willing for things to happen precisely the way they do happen. This attitude is, of course, the ancestor of Nietzsche’s “Yes” granted to the cosmos, a “yes” that immediately justifies the world’s existence.³ Finally, in the discipline of action, we are to try to ensure that all our actions are directed not just to our own immediate, short-term advantage, but to the interests of the human community as a whole.

Hadot finally came to believe that these spiritual attitudes – “spiritual” precisely because they are not merely intellectual, but involve the entire human organism, but one might with equal justification call them “existential” attitudes – and the practices or exercises that nourished, fortified, and developed them, were the key to understanding all of ancient

philosophy. In a sense, the grandiose physical, metaphysical, and epistemological structures that separated the major philosophical schools of Antiquity – Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism⁴ – were mere superstructures, intended to justify the basic philosophical attitude. Hadot deduced this, among other considerations, from the fact that many of the spiritual exercises of the various schools were highly similar, despite all their ideological differences; thus, both Stoics and Epicureans recommended the exercise of living in the present.

Hadot first published the results of this new research in an article that appeared in the *Annuaire de la Vê* section in 1977: “Exercices spirituels.” This article formed the kernel of his book *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Hadot 1995), and was no doubt the work of Hadot’s that most impressed Michel Foucault to the extent that he invited Hadot to propose his candidacy for a Chair at the Collège de France, the most prestigious academic position in France. Hadot did so and was elected in 1982. Hadot’s view on philosophy as a way of life consisting of the practice of spiritual exercises was given a more complete narrative form in his *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Hadot 2002).

Another aspect of his thought was more controversial: if philosophy was, throughout Antiquity, conceived as a way of life, in which not only those who published learned tomes were considered philosophers, but also, and often especially – one thinks of Socrates, who wrote nothing – those who lived in a philosophical way, then how and why did this situation cease? Hadot’s answer was twofold: on the one hand, Christianity, which had begun by adopting and integrating pagan spiritual exercises, ended up by relegating philosophy to the status of mere handmaid of theology. On the other, at around the same historical period of the Middle Ages, and not coincidentally, the phenomenon of the European University arose. Destined from the outset to be a kind of factory in which professional philosophers trained students to become professional philosophers in their turn, these new institutions led to a progressive confusion of two aspects that were, according to Hadot, carefully distinguished in Antiquity: doing philosophy and producing discourse about philosophy. Many modern thinkers, Hadot believed, have successfully resisted this confusion, but they were mostly (and this again is no coincidence) such extra-University thinkers as Descartes, Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer. For the most part, and with notable exceptions (one thinks of Bergson), University philosophy instruction has concentrated almost exclusively on discourse *about* philosophy rather than on philosophy itself, conceived as a practice or living act. Indeed, one might add,

extending Hadot's analysis, that contemporary universities, whether in their "analytic" manifestation as the analysis of language and the manipulation of quasi-mathematical symbols, or in their "continental" guise as rhetorical display, irony, plays on words, and learned allusions, seem to share one basic characteristic: they are quite incomprehensible, and, therefore, unimportant to the man or woman on the street. Hadot's work, written in a plain, clear style that lacks the rhetorical flourishes of a Derrida or a Foucault, represents a call for a radical democratization of philosophy. It talks about subjects that matter to people today from all walks of life, which is why it has appealed, arguably, less to professional philosophers than to ordinary working people, and to professionals working in disciplines other than philosophy.⁵

Pierre Hadot taught at the Collège until his retirement in 1992. In addition to Plotinus and Marcus, his teaching was increasingly devoted to the philosophy of nature, an interest he had picked up from Bergson that he had first set forth in a lecture at the Jungian-inspired Eranos meetings at Ascona, Switzerland in 1967 (Hadot 1968). Combined with his long-term love of Goethe (Hadot 2008), this research on the history of mankind's relation to nature would finally culminate in *The Veil of Isis (Le Voile d'Isis)*, a study of the origin and interpretations of Heraclitus' saying "Nature loves to hide," published a mere four years before his death (Hadot 2006). Here and in the preliminary studies leading up this work, Hadot distinguishes two main currents in the history of man's attitude to nature: the "Promethean" approach, in which man tries to force nature to reveal her secrets in order better to exploit her, and the "Orphic" attitude, a philosophical or aesthetic approach in which one listens attentively to nature, recognizing the potential dangers of revealing all her Secrets.

Memories

Having won a grant from the Canadian government to pursue my doctoral studies in Neoplatonism anywhere in the world, I followed an old teacher's advice and contacted the author of the book on the subject that I most admired: *Porphyre et Victorinus*. I first met Pierre Hadot at a conference at Loches, France, in the summer of 1987, where he gave a memorable lecture on "The Sage and the World" (Hadot 1991). He was kind enough to read and comment on the M.A. thesis I had written on Porphyry and, while I could not officially enroll under his direction for my

PhD since the Collège de France was not a degree-granting institution, I did enroll under his successor at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Philippe Hoffmann. After attending Hadot's lectures at the Collège for a couple of years, I persuaded him to allow me to translate some of his works into English, and this marked the beginning of a close friendship between Pierre and Ilsetraut Hadot and my wife Isabel and myself. As I continued my studies, he continued to help me out with advice, books, and articles and, when times got rough, with a few hundred francs per month from his own pocket as well.

What I remember most about Pierre Hadot was his simplicity. Although he had reached the highest echelons of the hierarchical French academic scheme, he never let it go to his head: in his lectures he spoke clearly, without excess rhetorical flourish. When he wrote on the blackboard, he did so with complete grace and relaxation, and often with that self-deprecating laugh that was so characteristic of him. On one occasion, he invited Isabel and me to lunch, along with half a dozen others; we were to meet at his office at the Collège de France. We all showed up, and Hadot began to lead the whole bunch of us off to the restaurant. In the hallway, however, he came across a lost-looking young couple, obviously foreigners, and asked them if he could help them. They were looking for the cafeteria, they told him timidly, and Pierre Hadot, instead of merely giving them directions, insisted on accompanying this unknown couple all the way to the cafeteria, leaving his "invited" guests to twiddle their thumbs. Each individual, known or unknown, deserved respect and courtesy in the view of Pierre Hadot. Yet he also spent a good deal of his life as an administrator, particularly at the EPHE, where he showed himself to be a tough and uncompromising negotiator, especially when questions of principle were at stake.

Over the years, my wife and I enjoyed the Hadots' hospitality on many occasions, often at their home in Limours, a suburb some 20 miles south of Paris, where he was very proud of his well-kept garden and loved to go for walks in the neighboring woods. When he was in Paris, we would often go for dinner to a Vietnamese restaurant on the Rue des Écoles, no longer extant, to which Michel Foucault had introduced him. He always encouraged us to have the deep-fried banana for dessert, mainly because, although he loved the dish, his delicate health and vigilant wife would not allow him to order it for himself, but he could always sneak a bite from someone else's plate. In every circumstance, he was the same: simple, unpretentious, with a mischievous gleam in his eye. Seldom has a man worn his erudition more lightly. Seldom, as well, has a man

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practiced so well what he preached. Although he won numerous awards and distinctions,⁶ he never discussed them in any tone other than that of self-deprecating humor. He liked to tell of how Jacqueline de Romilly once telephoned him to let him know he had been nominated for the prestigious Grand Prix de Philosophie of the Académie Française: “We didn’t have anybody this year,” she allegedly told him, “and so we thought of you.” He also had great fun with the fact that two volumes of his articles were published by Les Belles Lettres in a collection entitled “l’âne d’or” – “The Golden Ass.”⁷ He claimed, with a characteristic twinkle in his eye, that he had posed for the fine portrait of the golden donkey that graced the cover of these books.

As a young philosophy student, I had often been disillusioned by finding that my philosophical heroes had feet of clay: although they wrote fine-sounding phrases in their books, they were often vain, disdainful, or otherwise unpleasant when one met them in person. Not so Pierre Hadot: like Plotinus he was always available to himself, but above all to others. For his eightieth birthday, Hadot reserved a restaurant near Limours for over a hundred guests, who were distributed at tables in groups of six to eight. As the meal progressed, Hadot made sure to come and sit for a while at each table, laughing and joking with everyone, making each guest feel as though he or she were truly special to him. Waiters and hostesses received, unflinchingly, the same friendly, non-condescending treatment.

I last saw Pierre Hadot on April 12, 2010, when, despite his weakness, he made the trip from Limours to Paris to attend a celebration devoted to him at the library of the École Normale Supérieure. At age 88, he was extremely fragile, and his eyesight and hearing were failing rapidly. Yet he held out for 2 hours, answering questions from the audience – something he always disliked, convinced that he was not sufficiently eloquent in unrehearsed repartee – and seeming to regain strength as the evening progressed. At the end, he thanked the organizers and participants, emphasizing that what was important was that the event had been organized and carried out in an atmosphere of friendship and mutual respect. Soon afterward, he entered the hospital at Orsay and was diagnosed with pneumonia. He died less than two weeks after his appearance at the ENS accompanied, as he had been for 45 years, by his beloved Ilsetraut.

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 might well be, in a sense, one of the influential men of our epoch.”⁸ What is certain is that he has trained a generation of students and scholars who

continue his work, and that his writings, translated into many languages, have continued to inspire readers from throughout the world, many of whom wrote him to say in a variety of formulations: “You have changed my life.” Pierre Hadot was a man almost destitute of personal vanity, but if there was one thing he was proud of, it was not the multiple honors he received throughout his career, but the effect he had on the average reader.

The Present Volume

The idea for this volume arose in the course of discussions between Michael McGhee and me as a result of a conference on Philosophy as a Way of Life held at the University of Liverpool in November 2004. Initially, Michael McGhee was responsible for soliciting and editing the British contributions, and I for the North American and European ones. If this book has finally seen the light of day, it is due, above all, to the collaboration of Stephen Clark, who contributed his editorial expertise and efficiency to the project beginning in the spring of 2012.

The publication of this volume has, needless to say, taken much longer than initially foreseen, and I would like to thank the contributors and publisher for their patience. In the interim, some of the articles have appeared elsewhere in various forms.⁹ It is regrettable that Pierre Hadot did not live to see this publication. I believe, however, that in its breadth and variety, the present volume retains its value as a testimony to the importance of his notion of philosophy as a way of life.

Notes

1. *Les écrits de Plotin publiés dans l'ordre chronologique*, sous la dir. de P. Hadot, Paris: Éd. du Cerf (Coll. Textes). More than a dozen volumes have appeared in the series, two of them (*Traité 38* [VI,7], 1988; *Traité 50* [III,5], 1990) by Hadot himself.
2. Marc Aurèle, *Écrits pour lui-même*. Tome 1, Introduction générale. Livre I, éd. et tr. Pierre Hadot, avec la collab. de Concetta Luna. Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1998. (Collection des Universités de France).
3. Nietzsche, *Posthumous Fragments*, end 1866-Spring 1887, 7, [38], cited in Hadot (1995, p. 277).

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4. I leave out Cynicism and Skepticism, partly, because it is debatable whether they were actually “schools” as opposed to philosophical tendencies and, partly because, unlike the other schools they refrained from metaphysical speculation.
5. As of 2006, Hadot’s works had been cited by researchers working in management studies, economics, the study of Chinese thought, education, sociology, political science, and women’s studies, to name but a few.
6. 1969: Prix Saintour décerné par l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres; 1969: Prix Desrousseaux décerné par l’Association pour l’encouragement des Études Grecques; 1972: elected Corresponding Member of the Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur of Mainz; 1979: Silver medal, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique; 1985: Docteur honoris causa de l’Université de Neuchâtel; 1990: Prix Dagnan-Bouveret de l’Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques; 1992: Prix d’Académie (Fondation Le Métailarivière Fils), Académie Française; 1999: Grand Prix de Philosophie de l’Académie Française; 2000: elected Corresponding Member of the Akademie der Wissenschaften at Munich; 2002: Docteur honoris causa de l’Université de Laval (Québec).
7. *Études de philosophie ancienne*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1998. (L’âne d’or; 8); *Plotin. Porphyre. Études néoplatoniciennes*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1999. (L’âne d’or; 10). These works contain some of Hadot’s more technical works on the history of Greek and Latin philosophy, but also some of his early studies on the philosophy of nature. There is material for many more such volumes, among the 100 or so articles Hadot penned throughout his career.
8. “Pierre Hadot, 86 ans de sagesse,” *Le Point. Débats*, 17/04/2008, accessed at <http://www.lepoint.fr/actualites-chroniques/2008-04-18/pierre-hadot-86-ans-de-sagesse/989/0/238823>.
9. The present introduction is based on the obituary of Pierre Hadot which I contributed to the Harvard University Press Blog in 2010 (http://harvardpress.typepad.com/hup_publicity/2010/04/pierre-hadot-part-1.html). A version of my later contribution to the volume was published in Adams and Spencer (2007, pp. 5–17). A French version of Gwenaëlle Aubry’s contribution appeared in Davidson and Worms (2010); see also Rizvi (2012) and Ganeri (2010) for earlier versions of their essays. Constraints on the volume’s size mean that some papers originally intended for the volume, by Philippe Vallat, David Cooper, Stephen R. L. Clark, and Catalin Partenie, have been omitted. Cooper’s essay on Beauty is to be found at Cooper (2012).