TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGY OF SAGESSE

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I introduction: a masked philosopher

In one of his last interviews, Michel Foucault consented to speak to Le Monde on the condition of anonymity. Asked why he had done this, Foucault commented that he was moved by a “nostalgia for a time when, being quite unknown, what I said had some chance of being heard” (Foucault, “Masked Philosopher” 321). His editors ascribe to Foucault the desire to “demystify the power society ascribes to the ‘name’ of an intellectual” (note at 321). Pierre Hadot, one of Foucault’s key sources in his later explorations of Hellenistic and Roman philosophy, never had cause to seek such anonymity. For Hadot’s wide-ranging and remarkable scholarly production had a late and a far less extensive reception than that of Foucault, his sometime-interlocutor.

Hadot’s scholarly work after 1970 on the idea of ancient philosophy as a manner of living, as well as the production of learned discourses, is unusual firstly in so far as it has reached people outside of, as well as within, the academy (Hadot, Philosophie comme manière 232–33; Philosophy as a Way 285). Secondly, within academe his reception is unusually divided. Hadot’s earliest philological studies on patristics, the Roman rhetorician Marius Victorinus and Neoplatonism are widely respected.1 His better-known work on ancient philosophy as a way of life, and the transition between pagan philosophy and Christian philosophia and theology is cited as authoritative by historians of ideas such as Stephen Gaukroger, Wayne Hankey, Peter Harrison, Juliusz Domański, and Sorana Corneanu, not to mention Foucault.2

Yet within academic philosophy it is fair to say that Hadot’s work remains nearly invisible, if not quite masked. Since Hadot’s passing in April 2010, Pierre Hadot: L’Enseignement des antiques, l’enseignement des modernes has appeared in Hadot’s native French language (Davidson and Worms). There is one collection on his work so far in English, namely Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancients and Moderns (Chase, Clark, and McGhee). This latter collection, however, underscores Hadot’s invisibility as his own philosopher. Only one or two of the fifteen articles3 treat Hadot as, in Arnold Davidson’s words, not only “one of the great historians of ancient thought” but “also a great philosopher” (Davidson, “Préface” 7).
Instead, something like Hadot’s meta-philosophical conception of the ancients, and his signature notion of “spiritual exercises,” is taken for granted and applied to thinkers of different traditions, from the Greeks through to Descartes and more recent thinkers such as Leonard Nelson or the Gestalt psychologists.

Nevertheless, when we compare Hadot’s work on the Hellenistic and Roman philosophers with that of analytically trained scholars of ancient philosophy, even John M. Cooper or Martha Nussbaum (who are broadly sympathetic to therapeutic readings of the Stoics, Epicureans, and other ancient schools), great differences are apparent. Hadot has been accused by Cooper, in particular, of projecting onto all of ancient philosophy a “religious” conception of philosophia, biased by Hadot’s abiding interest in later antiquity and Neoplatonism (Pursuits of Wisdom 17–22, 402–03; “Socrates” 20–42). In this analytic-philosophical literature, that is to say, Hadot’s philosophy is masked in a different, less flattering way than in his seamless acceptance amongst historians of ideas. The worry is that Hadot, far from recovering a true sense of ancient philosophy, makes philosophy’s distinctive rational business and identity invisible behind the choice and cultivation of ways of living.

This paper starts from the contention that Pierre Hadot’s unusually divided reception attests to the different dimensions to Hadot’s own scholarly profile. In one of the few dedicated English-language articles on Hadot, Pierre Force’s admirable “In the Teeth of Time: Pierre Hadot on Meaning and Misunderstanding in the History of Ideas,” Force compellingly depicts Hadot’s oeuvre as drawn in at least two competing directions. Both of these fan out from his decisive encounter in the late 1950s with a modern philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, not any ancient thinker. Hadot was one of the first French intellectuals in the 1950s to write on Wittgenstein, and he corresponded briefly with Elizabeth Anscombe. In his 2004 Preface to a book collecting four articles on Wittgenstein, and in the vital, untranslated piece “Jeux de langage et philosophie,” Hadot underscores the shaping importance in all of his work on the ancient philosophers of the later Wittgenstein’s central notion of a language game (“Préface” 11–13). We cannot understand the sense of someone’s saying “God is dead,” to take Hadot’s loaded example in “Jeux de langage et philosophie,” outside of an awareness of its context. When it was said in the context of the ancient mystery cults, or within early Christianity, it meant something very different from when Friedrich Nietzsche has his madman say it in the The Gay Science, let alone when a philosopher today mouths it, having been prompted by bemused listeners to “say something philosophical” (“Jeux” 97–99).

The historicising need implied by this sense that in order to understand the meaning of any text or utterance, one must situate it in its original context, shapes the first of Hadot’s two polarities. Trained as a philologist, when Hadot read ancient philosophical and literary texts his ambition was to honour the historian’s duty “to aim for objectivity and, if possible, for truth” by always resitutating the works “within the concrete conditions in which they were written” (Present Alone 67). Hadot once commented:

I detest those monographs which, instead of allowing the author to speak by remaining close to the text, engage in obscure speculation claiming to decode and reveal the author’s tacit meaning, while the reader is left without any idea of what the thinker really “said.” (La Citadelle 10)

This historicising duty forms the spine of Hadot’s inaugural address at the Collège de France, “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy.” In different places Hadot underlines that his notion that, for the ancients, philosophy involved cultivating an entire bios rooted in the teachings and practices of the different schools is not a “stand-alone” idea, as it were. It is an inference to the best explanation, given the remarkably diverse literary legacy that has been left to us by the ancient philosophers (Present Alone 30–74). This is a legacy Hadot devoted his 1979–80 course at the École Pratique des Hautes
Études to itemising into over twenty different genres, spanning poetry, letters and dialogues through to consolations and treatises (“Cours” 162–67). If we go to Marcus Aurelius’ Meditations or Seneca’s Consolations to Marcia, expecting what we would today credit as a philosophical article or monograph, we will be forced to dismiss them as incomplete, incompetent, or “merely literature.” Understanding the “very essence of the phenomenon of ancient philosophy” as aiming at the formation of students, not the production of written or spoken discourses (“Forms of Life” 56), Hadot contends, allows us to accept that this “essence” was capacious enough to include consolatory work which we would today assign to the clinical psychologist. It was expansive enough to include the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius, writing Ta Eis Heauton [Things/Notes to Himself] in order to periodically recollect and imaginatively reanimate already-accepted theoretical principles, faced with the tests of his personal and political life (“Marcus Aurelius”).

Yet there is a second pole to Hadot’s scholarly persona, Pierre Force observes, which seems to pull in an almost completely opposing direction to the self-abnegating objectivity of Hadot-the-contextualising-historian of philosophical culture. As the letters Hadot received from non-academics around the world attest, Hadot’s books themselves seem quietly but unmistakably to always point back from the historical figures, themes, and texts they describe to present and future generations of readers, and to the author himself. At the end of the landmark piece on “Spiritual Exercises” (which famously influenced Foucault), Hadot makes a revealing confession. For him, searching the history of philosophy always involved, beneath its scholarly clothing, “a supplement, a surplus, which is the possibility of finding our [own] spiritual nourishment in it” (Present Alone 68):

Vauvenargues said, “A truly new and truly original book would be one which made people love old truths.” It is my hope that I have been “truly new and truly original” in this sense, since my goal has indeed been to make people love a few 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 are often extremely simple. Often, they even appear to be banal. Yet for their meaning to be understood, these truths must be lived, and constantly re-experienced. Each generation must take up, from scratch, the task of learning to read and to re-read these “old truths.” (“Spiritual Exercises” 108)

In The Present Alone is Our Happiness, with recourse to another modern thinker, Søren Kierkegaard, Hadot candidly admits that he has indeed been working as a masked philosopher in his own way, although for different reasons than the Foucault of 1980:

I would say that, for my part, it is a matter of what Kierkegaard calls indirect communication. If one says directly, do this or that, one dictates a conduct with a tone of false certainty. But thanks to the description of spiritual exercises lived by another, one allows a call to be heard that the reader has the freedom to accept or refuse. It is up to the reader to decide. He is free to believe or not to believe, to act or not to act. If I can judge by the numerous letters I have received, written by the most diverse kinds of people, from France, Germany, the United States, who tell me that my books have aided them spiritually […] I think that the method is good, and I always respond to these people, with reason, that it was not me, but the ancient philosophers, who have brought them this aid […] (Philosophie comme manière 232–33)²

Considering these two seemingly opposed sides to Hadot’s scholarly and philosophical persona, it seems to us that it can be said that Hadot’s analytic-philosophical critics have heard, loud and clear, Hadot’s quietly “esoteric” call to reanimate philosophy as a set of practices and experiences, as well as theoretical discourses. But they have contested it, both as philosophy and as history of philosophy. Meanwhile, the historians of ideas, less interested in “finding spiritual nourishment” or contributions to contemporary philosophical
debates than in examining historical ideas per se, have responded to the first, philological and historiographical register to Hadot’s persona. Our contribution here triangulates these two predominant strands of Hadot’s reception hitherto. For both of these responses, we suggest, misrepresent aspects of Hadot’s endeavours, and miss his distinct visage as his own philosopher, as well as an exacting philologist and historian of ideas. The fact that Hadot’s reception is characterised by this “double blindness” is indeed its own testimony to the uniqueness of Hadot’s philosophical trajectory in his oeuvre after 1970.

Hadot’s distinct, nearly invisible, philosophical originality in later twentieth- and early twenty-first-century ideas, we would contend, lies in two contributions. The first resides in the recovery of the exercices spirituels: a recovery whose nature and implications have been contested in existing literature, and which will not occupy us here. It will suffice to say that, philosophically, Hadot simply denies that talking of “spiritual exercises” necessarily robs us of the ability to distinguish philosophy from different species of supernaturalistic “religion.” Indeed, historically, Hadot claims that in the classical context of pagan civic and mystery cults, the “exercises” that interest him, with their goal of cultivating constant ways of seeing, desiring and acting (not, pace John M. Cooper, “moments” of any kind (Pursuits 22)), stood out as a distinctly novel, philosophical contribution to ancient culture. “The Greek and Roman religions,” he claims, “did not involve an inner commitment of the individual but were primarily social phenomena” (Present Alone 36). It was ancient philosophers who first conceived and prescribed practices like the premeditation of evils or the memento mori. So we should not project backwards, from the subsequent uptake of such exercises in Christianity (“Ancient Spiritual Exercises”), to the idea that they are necessarily other-worldly or “religious.” Far from pushing against the rational claims of the ancient philosophies, the exercises as Hadot sees them aim to carry philosophical rationality into all areas of life, reshaping subjects’ beliefs, affects, and customs: “[t]he spiritual exercises of the disciple will consist precisely in his attempts to always have present to mind these rules of life” (“La Philosophie antique” 222).

Hadot’s second, distinct philosophical contribution has been far less widely recognised and debated than the exercices spirituels, with the notable exception of Cory Winheimer’s “The Joy of Difference: Foucault and Hadot on the Aesthetic and the Universal in Philosophy.” It emerges most directly in a series of highly distinct pieces that Hadot wrote, later in his life, on the figure of the sage, the view from above, the ancients and nature, and the ethical or existential value of the present moment or “instant.” It is also reflected in a further, lesser-known side to Hadot’s intellectual identity: his abiding interest in natural philosophy, manifest in the last decade of his life in The Veil of Isis and his final book on Goethe (Veil; N’oublie pas). Hadot in these places, we will argue, moves towards what can be dubbed a kind of phenomenology: a phenomenology of how a person would perceive and evaluate the world who had, counter-factually, attained a wholly enlightened, wholly “sage” mode of living: in and through experience, argument, dialectic, a regime of life and spiritual exercises. This problematic, which we will dub a “phenomenology of Sagesse,” represents the heart of Hadot’s remarkably bold, remarkably untimely, and remarkably idiosyncratic intellectual trajectory – one which is only ever half-concealed in and behind his scholarly persona. Obviously, the very idea of such a transhistorical phenomenology or Sagesse – one which Hadot, for instance, traces forward from Chrysippus, Pyrrho, or Epicurus into modern figures like Goethe – not only seems quaint or, as his analytic critics have charged, tendentiously “non-philosophical.” From the perspective of any kind of historicism, meanwhile, any notion of “the” sage, with the definite article, seems similarly chimerical – a ceding of Hadot’s philological and historical nerve to his desire for spiritual orientation. Nevertheless, this problematic unites Hadot’s work on Hellenistic philosophy, Neoplatonic mysticism, and the philosophy of nature: at the same time as Hadot pursues it
nearly exclusively in the unassuming guise of a neutral, historical scholar. It demarcates this apparently philological work from that of contemporary philosophers and intellectual historians, and can differently unsettle both. Hadot tells us that it has its roots in the early “unitive experience” he describes vividly in *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*:

The night had come. The stars were shining in the immense sky. At this time, one could just already see them [...] My experience was one of being filled by an anxiety that was both terrifying and delicious, provoked by a sentiment of the presence of the world, or of the Whole, and of me in that world. In fact I was not able to formulate my experience but, afterwards, I sensed that it might correspond to such questions as “What am I? Why am I here? What is this world I am in?” I experienced a sentiment of strangeness, of astonishment, and of wonder at being-there (être-la). At the same time, I had the sense of being immersed in the world [...] the world was present to me, intensely present. Before long, I would come to discover that this consciousness of my immersion in the world, this impression of belonging to the Whole, was what Romain Rolland has called the “oceanic feeling.” (5–6)

This paper’s exegetical recovery of Hadot’s central philosophical problematic proceeds by looking firstly at Hadot’s exchange with the work of the later Michel Foucault.7 The reason for proceeding in this way is two-fold. On the one hand, this is the one extant exchange we have that features Hadot in debate about the foundations of his work, with a leading contemporary. It is as such a particularly revelatory piece of evidence. On the other hand, we will argue that Hadot remains much closer to Foucault than his criticisms of the latter might lead readers to suppose, and than extant readings of this “interrupted dialogue” have registered. Indeed, we shall argue that in Hadot’s astute highlighting of the difficulties facing Foucault’s reading of the ancients as practising an aesthetics of the self, Hadot approaches what remains the deep tension within his own

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sharpe

“return to the ancients,” to the extent that Hadot takes aim at more than historical reconstruction. Hadot’s own metaphysical agnosticism commits him to recovering in the ancients something like what modern readers might call an “aesthetic” approach to existence; at the same time as Hadot (arguably rightly) argues, contra Foucault, for the necessity of a strong metaphysical account of the Whole, if philosophy as a way of life is to be a meaningful prospect. Whether Hadot ever resolved this tension in his work would be the subject for further debate; we aim here to put such debate on a more adequate critical footing, by recovering the distinctive philosophical problematic of Hadot’s remarkable work.

2 hadot against, yet with foucault

Pierre Hadot’s dialogue with Michel Foucault shows very clearly, as in a microcosm, the two sides to Hadot’s complex intellectual persona that we introduced above. On one side, wearing his philological hat, Hadot criticises Foucault on textual, historical grounds. It is one of the few moments in his work that Hadot arguably comes close to an uncharitable pedantry. Hadot especially criticises Foucault (in a way that Orazio Irrera has shown applies amply to his own texts (Irrera 999–1002)) for not consistently stressing Seneca’s Stoic distinction between gaudium (joy) and voluptas (pleasure). For Hadot, Foucault focuses too heavily in his *History of Sexuality III* on “the uses of pleasure,” when pleasure was the principal goal of existence only for the Epicureans. It was not the central concern in Stoicism, or the other classical schools of philosophy (Hadot, “Réflexions” 324–25).

In Hadot’s later piece on “Un dialogue interrompu avec Michel Foucault: Convergences et divergences,” Hadot now argues that Foucault’s reading of the ancients is inimical to the way in which the goal of philosophy in the Stoics and Platonists was explicitly “le bien” (agathon), embracing an ethical or moral register, even when the word kalon was used (Hadot, “Dialogue interrompu” 308–09). Likewise, he charges that Foucault underplays the extent to which
atarxia, peace of mind, and (as we shall see) the cultivation of a kind of megalopsychia or “conscience cosmique” was the goal of ancient philosophical therapeutics across the schools (“Dialogue interrompu” 309–10). As in “Reflections on the ‘Culture of the Self,’” behind all of these historical qualms Hadot is baulking at the overarching Foucaultian categories of an “aesthetics of existence” or “culture of the self.” He sees these as modern anachronisms, if not as enshrining a “new form of dandyism” (Hadot, “Réflexions” 331; Flynn 615).

Hadot’s deepest criticism of Foucault concerns his failure to register that ancient philosophy did not aim so much at a culture of the self, its beautification or refinement, as at the conversion, transformation or exceeding of the self (dépassement du soi) (“Dialogue interrompu” 308; “Réflexions” 324–25). This is why, for Hadot, it is meaningful to compare the decisive moment of individuals’ “conversions” to some philosophical school in antiquity with forms of religious conversion (Hadot, “Conversion”; Foucault, Hermeneutics 207–15). In each of the different schools, some form of philosophical “transcendence of the ego” was involved: whether in achieving unity with the One (Neoplatonism), the higher pleasure involved in contemplating changeless things (Aristotle), harmony of one’s logos with the wider, cosmic Logos (Stoicism (“Réflexions” 325)), or the godlike life free of unnecessary fears and desires (as in the Epicureans). Aiming at a descriptor wide enough to capture these divergent conceptions of the self-transcending telos of philosophising, Hadot foregrounds the term “wisdom,” whose near-absence he also remarks in Foucault’s studies on Hellenistic and Roman thought (“Dialogue interrompu” 308). In several places, including in his later piece on Foucault, Hadot delineates three registers of this sagesse which he thinks need more robust accounts than they receive in Foucault: firstly, inner peace (atarxia), secondly inner liberty (autarcheia), and thirdly, the decisive conscience cosmique:

that is to say, the awareness of belonging in the human and cosmic Whole (Tout), a sort of dilation or transfiguration of the ego (moi) which realises grandeur of the soul (megalopsychia). (309)

Hadot’s assessment of the historical adequacy of Foucault’s reconstruction of the Hellenistic Stoics and Epicureans cannot detain us here (Irrera 999–1017). Certainly, recourse to sophia seems (literally) definitive for ancient philosophia. Yet Foucault’s wider contextualisation of the Socratic know thyself within wider classical concerns for the “care of the self” does not stress this definitive category. The difficulty comes when, shifting from Hadot’s philological to his philosophical persona, Hadot concludes both of his pieces on Foucault by returning to the convergences of their attempts to reanimate ancient philosophical culture or practices (“Dialogue interrompu” 311; “Réflexions” 331–32). Hadot is now forced to admit that, to the extent that the justification (and in some cases the rational or cognitive contents) of the ancients’ “spiritual exercises” rested on philosophers’ beliefs in the fundamental ontologies of their respective schools – and this is exactly what seems to be at stake in what Hadot terms the conscience cosmique – the advent of modern scientific culture seems to foreclose their possibility today. Acknowledging this, Hadot concludes his “Reflections on the ‘Culture of the Self’” by saying that the philosophical spiritual exercises at the heart of his work can be reanimated only to the extent that we “separate from them the philosophical or mythical discourses which accompanied them” (331).

The problem at this point is that readers can be forgiven for wondering what could remain of the philosophical notion of the Tout at stake in the conscience cosmique in Hadot’s own accounts of the spiritual exercises. Certainly, Hadot assigns a key place to some substantive conception of the Whole, to which the philosophical self is assimilated, in delineating his deepest divergences from Foucault’s care of the self. This, both Irrera and Wimberly have observed (Wimberly 192–97; Irrera 1007–08). Yet when Hadot stands on his own two feet, in his more distinctly philosophical persona, the
precise visage of this larger normative horizon begins to waver.

By confronting this problem which emerges so pointedly in Hadot’s interrupted dialogue with Foucault, however, we can see the formative parameters of Hadot’s distinctive philosophical problematic emerging: his attempts, through close readings of ancient and modern texts, to delineate a phenomenological account of what a fully actualised wisdom, embodied in “the figure of the sage,” would involve. Alongside Thomas Flynn and Martha Nussbaum, but on this very different territory, we will thus agree that Hadot is much closer to Foucault than his critical articles on the latter might suggest. Hadot protests against Foucault’s idea of an “aesthetics” of philosophical existence. It seems anachronistic to him, as an understanding of ancient thought, and to uncritically conceal the extent to which:

the moderns tend to represent the beautiful as a reality independent of good and evil, whereas for the Greeks, on the contrary, the word, when applied to human beings (aux hommes), normally implies a moral value, for example in the texts of Plato and Xenophon, cited by Foucault. (“Dialogue interrompu” 308)

With that said, Hadot’s ontological agnosticism leaves him with little room to move, in terms of prescriptively describing the conscience du Tout which would in some way capture or preserve this moral dimension which Foucault’s aestheticism misses. His own wider commitments or reservations push him towards a kind of aesthetic phenomenology which leaves the metaphysical question in abeyance (Wimberly 192–97). We turn to this prospect now.

3 aesthetics and the phenomenology of sagesse

Two paths lie open and are duly explored by Hadot as he tries to reconcile his own commitments, on one side, to a form of metaphysical agnosticism – or acceptance of something like the modern, non-teleological and non-providential conception of nature; and on the other, to recovering and advertising as “live options” for modern men and women ancient conceptions of lived philosophical wisdom.

The first path is exemplified, very clearly, in a lesser-known Hadotian essay on “Giordano Bruno et l’inspiration des anciens.” In this piece, Hadot writes sympathetically of Bruno’s re-conception of the contemplative life, taking now as its object the mathematically infinite universe opened to modern Europeans by the Copernican revolution. Faced with this post-Copernican world picture, Bruno does not see reasons for Pascalian despair. He sees wondrous testimony of the infinite, and infinite power of God (“Giordano Bruno” 148–49). Such a contemplative stance, Hadot observes, has ancient precedents in the Epicurean school. Epicurus, following Democritus and earlier atomists, already posited the spatiotemporal, ateleological infinity of the cosmos. But this insight had not caused metaphysical angst and a sense of cosmic homelessness. On the contrary, the Epicureans found in atomism’s revelation of a non-anthropomorphic, non-providential and spatio-temporally infinite universe “beyond the walls of the world” a source of peace from anxieties concerning mortality and the interventionist gods (Lucretius, De Rerum Natura I 172; Hadot, “Giordano Bruno” 148–49).

In this piece on Bruno, then, as well as in his lifelong engagement with Goethe (N’oublie pas), Hadot gestures towards accepting a modern, post-Epicurean account of the Whole, as the contemplative basis for renewed practices of cultivating philosophical megalopsychia. At the very least – for his mask as a commentator does not fall in this essay – Hadot suggests that there is nothing in the modern scientific worldview that militates against our cultivating such a conscience cosmique. Nevertheless, Hadot much more often retains his ontological agnosticism and his philosophical eclecticism, as Wimberly has noted (195). Such agnosticism, it seems to us, is indeed of the essence of his mature work on philosophy as a way of life – both methodologically, allowing for the impartial examination of ideas from different schools, but also more substantively.
One of the characteristic features of Hadot’s writings, indeed, is the way they move more or less seamlessly between describing, with seemingly equal approval, the ideas and attitudes of the two predominant Hellenistic schools, namely Epicureanism and Stoicism (often with passages drawn also from the Platonists and Peripatetics, and in *The Veil of Isis*, a large choir of artistic and philosophical voices). Instead of agonising over these schools’ ontological differences (indeed, “we [should] disengage from them the fundamental propositions that they considered essential” (*Philosophy as a Way* 273)), Hadot much more often presents his position as reconciliation itself. Each of the ancient schools, he claims, presents “models of life, fundamental forms in accordance with which reason can be applied to human existence, and archetypes of the quest for wisdom,” or else what he calls “possible fundamental attitudes of reason” (ibid.). He draws our attention in particular to what Chase and Davidson call two “themes” that allegedly shape the Hellenistic schools’ conceptions of philosophy, as well as that of the different forms of Platonism: attention to the present instant, and the view from above. These two themes serve to describe the enlarged perspective of *autarcheia* and *megaloopsychia* at stake in the lived practice of the ancient philosophies. Yet they are not addressed in contemporary analytic accounts of Hellenistic and Roman philosophy: whether John M. Cooper’s *Pursuits of Wisdom* or, for instance, Brad Inwood’s *Reading Seneca*. They play a structuring role in Hadot’s work on Marcus Aurelius, his wider studies on the metaphilosophical idea of “philosophy as a way of life,” and his last work on Goethe.

The first of the two themes is a transformed, heightened attention to the present “instant” (“Only the Present”). Primarily, the present should attract our philosophical and ethical attention as the only temporal tense in which we can act and change the world: as against what our passions suggest, which attach us to unchangeable regrets or future contingencies beyond our control. “The present alone is our happiness,” Hadot cites Goethe’s *Faust* (“Only the Present” 217–20; *N’oublie pas* 16–23). Secondly, the present moment should be ascribed importance given the transience of our lives and the irreversibility of time. This means that each moment is singular, irreplaceable (*N’oublie pas* 42; “Forms of Life” 69; “Spiritual Exercises” 88; “Only the Present” 224). Yet, thirdly, the present is to be valorised philosophically as involving at each instant the unfolding of a timeless, recurrent natural order of which we form a small part. Our death, for instance, is seen by both Stoics and Epicureans as just as natural as our birth. Surprise in classical thought (vs. wonder) is generally condemned as foolish, for the philosopher understands that there is nothing wholly new under the sun, at the same time as each passing instant is singular.

The second exercise theme which marks out Hadot’s work as novel and distinctive is that of the view from above (*d’en haut*). If attentiveness to the present moment seems to imply, as critics charge, the influence of an abiding, anti-philosophical attraction to mystical immediacy (Wimberly 194–96), this view from above involves the philosopher resituating his or her life and concerns, precisely, in the larger mediating perspective of the rational philosophical account of the Whole s/he has theoretically accepted. The spatial stipulation of seeing self and world from “on high” is, in this sense, metaphorical. But it is such a compelling metaphor, as Hadot alerts us, that it recurs in Plato, Cicero, Lucretius, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius and Philo – and other sources might be added (“View” 238–50). Seen from on high, we appear almost as insects, tracing out repetitively the same kinds of minute and passing courses which appear almost completely insignificant: what Foucault, elaborating on these exercises in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, terms an “irony of the miniscule” (306–07). This diminution of the scale of our physical selves metaphorises the way that our passion-bound absorption in the world, caught up in consuming desires for money, recognition, power, sexual conquest, etc., reflects more or less unconditional commitments to needs (in Epicureanism) or objects and evaluative commitments (in Stoicism) which a
philosophically rational account of our nature shows to be unnecessary. Seen from a point of philosophical elevation, perched atop our Epicurean or Stoic philosophies, these concerns are less mountains than molehills. For seen philosophically, such needs and desires involve no real prerequisites for eudemonia or ataraxia, but things we can as well, or better, go without.

The key thing, in terms of Hadot’s philosophical project, is that this thematic metaphor of the “view from above” does not presuppose any single dogmatic ontology, no more than does a heightened attentiveness to the present moment and its demands. It only requires some account of a world much greater in scale than the tiny circles of concern which our lives circumscribe, into whose greater frame “the moi” can be “reinserted” by the philosopher’s transformed mode of perception (Hadot, “Sage et Monde” 346). The Stoics gave one such account, that of a cosmos guided by a providential Logos; the Epicureans, another, that of atoms and void, with the clinamen allowing free choice etc. Thus, like attention to the present, Hadot’s elevation of the view from above to the heart of classical thought, as he sees it, allows him to freely adduce examples of this exercise from across the ancient schools: and indeed, in modern figures (N’oublie pas 119, 229, 237–39). More importantly, in terms of his philosophical aim to reanimate “old truths” and philosophical practices, Hadot’s elevation of the view from above to the heart of ancient philosophical practice frees Hadot of the need to face and resolve the ontological question which, like Foucault, he hesitates to directly pose.

In place of any prescriptive ontology of the Whole, Hadot’s focus instead centres upon a third theme in his work: and one which again differentiates this work sharply from other commentators on the ancients. This is Hadot’s interest in the figure of the Sage, as the this-worldly conduit of the two exercises of attentiveness to the present and the view from above. Hadot is able, rightly, to point to the much greater role biography played in ancient philosophical culture and writing, from Plato’s Socrates to the Lives of the Philosophers of Diogenes Laertius or Eunapius. This is because, Hadot claims, the sage was the living, personified embodiment of the philosophical ideal, with his inner freedom, tranquillity, and expansive sense of his own, minute place in the larger whole. In a revealing passage at the end of “The Figure of the Sage,” a piece untranslated into English, Hadot for one moment lets his commentarial mask slip, in order to express his own conception of what the ancient literature on this idealised figure was aiming at:

Above all, it seems to me that this figure of the sage is in some way ineluctable. It is the necessary expression of the tension, the polarity, of the duality […] inherent in the human condition. On the one hand […] man has need, in order to support his condition, of being inserted in the tissue of social and political organisation […] But this sphere of the quotidian does not entirely shelter him: it is confronted inevitably by what we can call the inexpressible, by the terrifying enigma of man’s being-there, here and now, given over to death, in the immensity of the cosmos: to take conscience of the self and of the existence of the world is a revelation which ruptures the security of the habitual and the quotidian […] The figure of the sage responds thus to an indispensable need […] The sage will […] be the man capable of living on the two planes, perfectly adapted to the quotidian, like Pyrrho, and nevertheless plunged [plongé] in the cosmos; devoted to the service of men, and nevertheless perfectly free in his interior life; fully conscious and yet at peace; forgetting nothing of what is unique and essential […] It is this ideal that the philosopher must try to realise. (“Figure” 254)

The reader, then, can see that Hadot himself, despite his criticisms of Foucault, does not shrink from drawing freely on modern aesthetic — indeed, as here, on modern existentialist (Flynn 615–16) — categories to describe this kind of philosophical “being-there.” Hadot’s piece “The Sage and the World” in fact holds a vital place in a series of important, highly original pieces by Hadot on ancient man and nature, which overlap with his texts on this figure of the sage. “The Sage and the World” opens by asking
about the *rapport* between the ancient sage and the Whole. “The sage’s consciousness of the world is something peculiar to him alone,”

Hadot quotes Bernard Groethuysen:

> Only the sage never ceases to have the whole constantly present to his mind. He never forgets the world, but thinks and acts with a view to the cosmos [...] The sage is a part of the world; he is cosmic. He does not let himself be distracted from the world, or detached from the cosmic totality [...] The figure of the sage forms, as it were, an indissoluble unity with man’s representation of the world. (“Sage and the World” 251)

The piece then goes on to explore the parallels between the sage’s sense of the singularity of the instant, and his “immersion” in the whole, and the discourses of modern aesthetics. Hadot indeed draws directly in this connection upon the modern notion of *la perception esthétique* developed from Baumgarten, through Kant, Callois and Merleau-Ponty. Hadot’s argument is that, with the success of science and the eclipse of the philosophical ideal of *sagesse* within scientific culture, modern aesthetics emerged as a separate field of inquiry in order “to preserve the cosmic dimension which is essential to human existence” (“Sage et le monde” 349). For Hadot, that is to say, Kant’s or Merleau-Ponty’s emphases on seeing things aesthetically as solely là, there, without the usual veils of our ego-bound interests and concerns are legatees of the Stoics’ cultivation of a benign indifference towards all natural things beyond our control (349–52). In Carus’ attempts to “represent the life of the earth,” Paul Klee’s wish to cultivate his art from out of a “dialogue with nature,” Cézanne’s longing “to lose myself in nature [...] the immensity, the torrent of the world,” or Callois’ claims concerning artistic creation as a “particular case of the fecundity of nature,” Hadot likewise sees modern avatars of the ancient, philosophical conscience cosmique and dépassement du soi (ibid.).

In his related, fascinating piece “L’Homme antique et la nature,” Hadot contests the idea that the artistic “landscape,” in either its charming or its sublime forms, is a distinctly modern invention, unknown to the ancient world (“L’Homme antique” 307–18). Hadot reflects upon ancient mural art and décors, and the recurrent ancient philosophical and poetic hymns to the simple, rustic life. Indeed, Hadot ties the ancient appreciation for landscapes to a “poetic or philosophical” lineage in ancient thinking about nature for which physics was a spiritual exercise: namely, that lineage of ancient thought which is the subject of most of his post-1970 studies. And again, Hadot is far from shy about using modern-sounding aesthetic terminology to describe the ancients’ feelings of appreciation before landscapes. Nor does he hesitate to adduce aesthetic categories to try to capture what he thinks is important in the ancients’ “Orphic,” contemplative sense of nature. On the contrary, Hadot tells us that the very idea of a “landscape” per se cannot be thought of except as the correlate of a regard upon nature which has an aesthetic dimension: that is to say, it is disinterested. The field or the stream becomes a landscape, when we regard it not as a frontier, or a means of production or of commerce posing technical problems, but when we regard it for itself, without a practical finality. This disinterested regard of the spectator separates out a privileged field from the totality of nature, but it doesn’t in this way solely “limit” or “demarcate” the landscape. It also unifies it, gives it a certain structure, it organises it. It perceives it as a sort of expressive physiognomy, so that it emanates a certain atmosphere, a certain sentiment, a certain character. This regard of the spectator, in his perception of what one could call a “corner of nature” in this way, anticipates at the same time the totality of nature taken as a whole in this section separated out by his gaze from the very heart of this totality. (310)

Classicists may well hesitate, as Hadot baulks at Foucault’s aesthetics of existence, at the seeming anachronism of using the modern term “aesthetic” to describe ancient cultural
forms. It remains true that Hadot is doing several things here which are philosophically novel, and highly provocative as well. Firstly, in effect reversing the charge of anachronism, Hadot positions our modern fascination with aesthetic experience and artistic creation as the echo and legacy of the modes of perception he argues that ancient philosophy had sought to describe in its extensive literature on the figure of the sage, and savoured in their contemplative appreciation of nature. This is one leitmotif of both the Veil of Isis and N’oublie pas de vivre, his final book on Goethe (Veil 182–89; N’oublie pas 236–66). In the former study, Hadot thus can directly link Kant on the sublime with Seneca on the figure of the sage:

Without any appearance of the word “sublime,” we glimpse the presence of this feeling in the famous phrase that appears at the end of The Critique of Pure Reason: “Two things fill the soul with ever-renewed and ever-growing admiration and veneration, the more frequently and constantly reflection applies itself to them: the starry sky above me and the moral law within me.” In this famous text, I think I perceive a structure analogous to that of a passage from Seneca in which he also associates the moral conscience – that of the sage – with the spectacle of the world: “I look upon wisdom with the same stupefaction with which, at other times, I look at the world, this world that I often contemplate as if I were seeing it for the first time.” (Veil 277)¹⁰

Secondly, though, Hadot is in effect asking us to consider that ancient philosophy aimed at inculcating in students, and allowing them to retain and reactualise through practices, the kind of transformed modes of perception that moderns can relate to through our experiences of art and of natural beauty. This thought also may be contentious, but it is nothing if not novel and distinct. As the final part of Veil of Isis attests, which is dedicated to modern, contemplative modes of experiencing nature as an object of awe and even anxiety (Veil 247–314), it also arguably speaks directly to the heart of Hadot’s intentions, beyond the way that he has been widely represented, and criticised, hitherto.

4 concluding remarks: an aesthetics of le monde?

If the work of this paper has somewhat succeeded, we will have gone a way towards unmasking Pierre Hadot’s unique and remarkable philosophical contributions to contemporary academic culture. The point has not been to proselytise, so much as to analyse. With the analytic-philosophical critics of his work, we have argued that Pierre Hadot was indeed a philosopher, as well as an historian of ideas. We have denied, however, that he was a religious supernaturalist, showing instead how Hadot continually wrestles with a very modern metaphysical agnosticism. Beyond both Hadot’s critics amongst the analytics and the historians of ideas, we have claimed that Hadot’s unique philosophical contribution to contemporary debate, seen correctly, lies in his attempting to delineate a “phenomenology of sagesse.” At its core is the proposition that there is a peculiar “existential density […] that escapes all attempts at theorisation and systematisation” at the heart of the different ancient schools’ conceptions of the best human life (What is Ancient Philosophy? 275). This “density” is neither identical with nor reducible to the theoretical systems these schools developed to orient their sunphilosophes. This is why Hadot proposes that moderns can reanimate and explore ancient philosophical practices, while suspending their judgement concerning many of the propositions contained in the ancient philosophers’ discourses.

Hadot, for his part, seeks to enucleate this “existential density” within ancient philosophy by historical-philological explorations of the “themes” of attention to the present moment and the view from above; of the ancient discourses surrounding the idealised figure of the sage; and of the ancients’ senses of nature, the world, and our place within it. Yet, in order to describe the sage’s untroubled sagesse, we have argued (alongside, but also differently
from Wimberly), 11 Hadot is forced by his own ontological agnosticism to draw heavily on aesthetic categories, despite his criticism of Foucault’s idea of an “aesthetics of the self.” The difference between the two thinkers at this level lies in how, in Hadot, what we are given is less an aesthetics of the self than an aesthetics of le monde or le Tout: that is, of nature as a source of contemplative wonder, but also as a Whole in which our own concerns form only a tiny part, but which human beings mostly misperceive through absorption in quotidian life.

As will have become clear, we are ourselves agnostic or zetetic about accepting each one of Pierre Hadot’s claims without a scholarly reservation, at the same time as an appreciation of the ambition and quiet audacity of his work seems to us to merit the deepest admiration. In particular, it seems unclear to us whether a phenomenological reconstruction of a “sage” sense of the world, like we find in Hadot’s works on the ancients, can forever keep at bay larger metaphysical questions. With that much said, we hope here to have provided a more adequate ground for the reading of Hadot’s “new and truly original” work: a task which might forestall some of the misreadings of his texts, balance their partial receptions, and at the same time recapture their underlying scope and ambition (“Spiritual Exercises” 108).

disclosure statement

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notes

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1 See Hadot, Porphyre et Victorinus; Plotinus, Or the Simplicity of Vision.

2 For a sample of work in the history of ideas that draws from Hadot, see Gaukroger; Corneanu; Sellars, “De Constantia”; The Art of Living; Hankey; Domanski.


4 Mediating these two poles, Force argues (30–34), is Hadot’s philological and historical fascination with the large role of what we would consider “misunderstanding” (contresens) taking old ideas in new contexts, in engendering new directions in Western intellectual history.

5 On Hadot and Kierkegaard, see Irina 157–71; Gregor 65–84; Sharpe, “Socratic Ironies” 409–35.


7 See Wimberly 191–202; Flynn 609–22; Irrera 995–1017.

8 See Foucault, Hermeneutics of the Subject 10–25; but for exceptions, see 71–72 (in Plato); 137, 194–95 (in Epicureanism); 458–59 (in Stoicism).

9 The quote comes from a section of the essay not present in the English translation.

10 We note that Hadot’s thought here gives a surprising new angle on why it is that aesthetics, art and the figure of the artist have so fascinated the moderns (Eagleton). At the same time, en passant, this thought suggests an answer to the question of where, within the classical heritage, we can find the consideration of modes of experience that the European tradition has since Burke or Kant sought in aesthetic contemplation.

11 Wimberly’s argument is that Hadot is at his core a mystic. His theoretical agnosticism reflects a larger epistemic scepticism about the limits of language, seen most clearly in the works on Wittgenstein (but it might also be sought in Hadot’s near-lifelong work on Plotinus). It follows from this that people are free to choose different philosophical forms of life, and this is only a matter of taste: whence “aesthetic” (Wimberly 196). We have argued here that the aesthetic is more clearly central in Hadot’s attempt to capture the core dimensions of the “sage’s” sense of the natural world, and of his place within it. Wimberly’s argument concerning the place of mysticism in Hadot’s thought has been skirted here, owing to limitations of space. It seems to us fundamentally correct, but to omit the other particular
dimensions of Hadot’s masked philosophy we have highlighted here.

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