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Academic Philosophy as a Way of Life

Over the past few decades, the idea of philosophy as a way of life (PWL) has gained undeniable prominence in contemporary debates about the nature and function of philosophy. Pierre Hadot forged the notion to denote the specific way in which ancient philosophers conceived of and practiced philosophy, stressing its performative character and its potential for self-transformation on the basis of what he called “spiritual exercises.” Referring primarily to the Hellenistic and Roman eras, Hadot claimed 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.”¹

1) Pierre Hadot, “Philosophy as a Way of Life,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Blackwell Publishers 1995), 265.

Furthermore, he also implied that some modern and contemporary philosophers came close to this model of philosophical practice and described it as his own metaphilosophical ideal. As he comments in the same text: “Such is the lesson of ancient philosophy: an invitation to each human being to transform himself. Philosophy is a conversion, a transformation of one’s way of being and living, and a quest for wisdom.”²

This normative and pedagogic component is a crucial aspect of Hadot’s account of PWL. Indeed, Hadot is not just describing what philosophy was in the past, but also evaluating what it is in the present and considering what it could become beyond his (and our) time. This is one of the reasons that made his approach so popular and led to so many fruitful developments in the field of PWL. Inspired by Hadot’s account, which was complemented by the late Foucault’s own reflections on philosophy’s practical and performative potential, recent scholarship has characterized PWL as a metaphilosophical model that can be fruitfully used to criticize current academic practices and to develop innovative methodological approaches to the study, research, and teaching of philosophy, which in turn might enable a transformation of philosophical practices in the context of modern universities.³

But what exactly is philosophy as a way of life? Given the contemporary prominence of such notion, it might seem strange to pose such a question. However, as much as the expression has entered contemporary philosophical debate, there is still much to discuss regarding what it entails and what distinguishes it from other possible ways of conceiving of and practicing philosophy. Despite several attempts to define and characterize the metaphilosophical model in question,⁴ consensus has

2) Ibid., 275.

3) See, for example, Matthew Sharpe and Kirk Turner, “Bibliopolitics: The History of Notation and the Birth of the Citational Academic Subject,” *Foucault Studies*, no. 25 (2018): 146–73; Jake Wright, “On the Benefits of Philosophy as a Way of Life in a General Introductory Course,” *Metaphilosophy* 51, nos. 2–3 (April 2020): 435–54; Steven Horst, “Philosophy as Empirical Exploration of Living,” *Metaphilosophy* 51, nos. 2–3 (April 2020): 455–71; and Kramer and Faustino, “Reconstructing Professional Philosophy,” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 77, nos. 2–3 (2021): 513–46.

4) See especially John M. Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus*, (Princeton University Press, 2012); Michael Chase, “Observations on Pierre Hadot’s Conception of Philosophy as a Way of Life,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Historical, Contemporary, and Pedagogical Perspectives*, eds., James M. Ambury, Tushar Irani and Kathleen Wallace (Wiley, 2021), 262–86; John Sellars, “What is Philosophy as a Way of Life?,” *Parrhesia* 28, (2017): 40–56; Stephen R. Grimm and Caleb Cohoe, “What is Philosophy as a Way of Life? Why Philosophy as a Way of Life?,” *European Journal*

not yet been reached and scholars seem to operate with different ways of understanding this notion. Indeed, many books, journal issues (including a past double issue of this journal) and articles have been published on this notion, and whereas many of them follow closely Hadot's insights and language, others introduce significant shifts in the way Hadot defines philosophy as a way of life or regards the original and best example of this understanding of philosophy, ancient philosophers. Scholars working on Hadot's wake have emphasized different aspects of his analyses and in some cases opposed important points of his account.⁵ This led to significant divergences in the field, and even though the same notion is employed, its meaning is somewhat unclear, diversified, and vague. While this complexity and diversity might be fruitful, it can also introduce much ambiguity in discussions or even hinder further work in the field.

This double thematic issue is thus dedicated to a conceptual and metaphysical discussion of PWL, trying to determine its boundaries, features, and distinguishing marks, as well as the crossroads and deadlocks it might still face and possible ways to overcome them. While the second volume of this thematic issue will focus on a range of aspects that help define PWL or at least map some of its main crossroads, this one will discuss a particular point that has been crucial ever since Hadot introduced the notion. One of the ways of defining a certain thing, is by contrasting it with what it is not and indeed, when describing PWL, Hadot often does it through contraposition to one particular way of conceiving of and practicing philosophy, namely academic philosophy and the way philosophy is currently practiced in universities. A detailed discussion of some aspects of Hadot's evaluation of university philosophy and its contrast to ancient philosophical practice might thus not only shed light on his notion of PWL, but also illuminate one of the most

of *Philosophy* 29, no. 1 (March 2021): 236–51; and Matthew Sharpe and Michael Ure, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. History, Dimensions, Directions*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

5) For instance, Chase's, Sharpe's and Ure's work follows and expands Hadot's analyses, whereas Nussbaum, Cooper, and Sellars (at least in his 2017 article, "What is Philosophy as a Way of Life?") deviate from Hadot in some important points. A detailed consideration of the different works on the field would produce a much more diverse landscape and render problematic what exactly is accepted by all and what are the divergences. For a critical assessment of Hadot's (and Foucault's) work on ancient philosophy, see Marta Faustino and Hélder Telo, eds., *Hadot and Foucault on Ancient Philosophy*, (Brill, 2024). For a recent state of the art of the field, see Matthew Sharpe, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: New Research Directions* (Brill, forthcoming).

fruitful and promising avenues of research and application of PWL opened up by Hadot's work.

The relation between philosophy and the university is a complex one and it plays a central role in Hadot's essay on the notion of PWL.⁶ After discussing the way ancient philosophers conceived of and practiced philosophy, Hadot offers a brief account of the history of philosophy as a way of life. In this history, Hadot presents the advent of universities in the Middle Ages as a moment of profound transformation, that deeply changed the way philosophy was understood and practiced and that can still be recognized today. According to Hadot in this essay, Christianity presented itself from its very beginnings as a way of life, borrowing elements from ancient philosophy and integrating most of its ascetic and spiritual practices. While the Middle Ages inherited the notion of the Christian way of life, "the medieval universities witnessed the elimination of the confusion which had existed in primitive Christianity between theology, founded on the rule of faith, and traditional philosophy, founded on reason."⁷ In this context, philosophy was reduced to "the 'servant' of theology," providing the latter with "the conceptual, logical, physical, and metaphysical materials it needed" and becoming "a purely theoretical and abstract activity."⁸ While ancient spiritual practices became completely and exclusively integrated in the Christian spirituality and way of life, philosophy was totally emptied of the spiritual component that had characterized it in ancient times and stopped being a way of life. Hence, as Hadot concludes, "the Middle Ages saw a radical change in the content of philosophy as compared to antiquity," a change that was furthermore perpetuated by the fact that from that moment on, "theology and philosophy were taught in those universities which had been creations of the medieval church."⁹ As a consequence, Hadot adds in his foreword to Juliusz Domański's *Philosophy, Theory or Way of Life?*, even "when philosophy in the 17th and especially the 18th century regains its autonomy, it will always preserve the heritage of the scholastic university, that is, the predominance of the theoretical dimension."¹⁰

6) See Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Blackwell Publishers 1995), 264–76.

7) Hadot, "Philosophy as a Way of Life," 270.

8) Ibid.

9) Ibid.

10) Hadot, "Foreword," in Juliusz Domański, *Philosophy, Theory or Way of Life? Controversies in Antiquity*,

This was a radical break that, in Hadot's eyes, not only emptied philosophy from its original vocation and role, but also left human beings without the type of real *paideia* or pedagogy of the soul that philosophy had offered. Universities do not aim to form human beings, as ancient philosophy did. Rather, as Hadot complains, they are "made up of professors who train professors, or professionals training professionals"¹¹ and their goal is simply to produce specialists who might in turn train other specialists: "it is no longer a matter, as in Antiquity, of training persons, but professors, who will in turn train other professors."¹² From scholastic university onwards, philosophy became no more than a "discourse developed in the classroom, and then consigned to books," in the context of which it was "obviously no longer a way of life or form of life – unless it be the form of life of a professor of philosophy."¹³ As a result, "genuinely creative philosophical activity"¹⁴ could develop only outside the university and even if some modern and contemporary philosophers did recover some practical and existential elements of ancient philosophical practice – as attested by exceptional figures, such as Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, Leibniz, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche¹⁵ – they remained the exception, and not the rule. This tension with professional philosophy becomes even more striking when one considers how very few notable figures from the history of philosophy worked within universities, and how many even rejected positions in them (such as Spinoza), or at the very least, found them dubious homes for the quest of the love of wisdom (such as Schopenhauer). In Hadot's short formulation, "ancient philosophy proposed to mankind an art of living. By contrast, modern philosophy appears above all as the construction of a technical jargon reserved for specialists."¹⁶

From the above description it seems evident that Hadot sees the university and particularly university philosophy as the enemy of philosophy as a way of life or, at the very least, thinks that there is a deep tension or conflict between PWL and academic

the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, ed. Eli Kramer (Brill, 2024), xxvi.

11) Hadot, "Philosophy as a Way of Life," 270.

12) Hadot, "Foreword," xxvi.

13) Hadot, "Philosophy as a Way of Life," 271.

14) *Ibid.*, 270.

15) See *ibid.*, 270–71.

16) *Ibid.*, 272.

philosophy. We must wonder whether Hadot's reading of the history of PWL and the university is accurate, and also whether his criticisms were meant to completely divorce philosophy from the university or rather to try to renew the way philosophy is practiced within the Academy. His account can be and has been criticized from several different angles, most important of which is perhaps the work of his colleague and friend Juliusz Domański, who presented a more complex and nuanced view of Scholastic philosophy, its relation to Antiquity and its respective way of life.¹⁷ Hadot himself recognized this fact and admitted to having changed some of his positions on the topic as a consequence of coming into contact with Domański's research on the conception of philosophy in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.¹⁸ On the one hand, Hadot agrees with Domański's view that the transformation of philosophy with the advent of universities is a continuation of the tendency seen throughout the Middle Ages, where philosophy was relegated to the status of the liberal arts, serving as a kind of "propaedeutic to Christianity."¹⁹ On the other hand, Domański's demonstration of the permanence of an active and practical pursuit of wisdom in authors such as Peter Abelard, Boethius of Dacia, Roger Bacon, Erasmus, and Petrarch led Hadot to realize that "the rediscovery of philosophy as a way of life" was actually earlier than he had claimed, and in fact not disconnected from the university, as "it too began to be sketched in the medieval universities."²⁰ It is therefore perhaps not so easy to draw a clear distinction between PWL and university philosophy.

Be it as it may, Hadot's and Domański's reflections show the importance of university philosophy for philosophy as a way of life and, conversely, the importance of PWL for university philosophy. In particular, they show how the consideration of both depends on the interconnection between the history of philosophy and the history of university and particularly university philosophy. Any form of philosophy – including PWL – must consider the central role the university as an institution plays in the history and the present of philosophy. Consequently, in order to better define

17) See Juliusz Domański, *Philosophy, Theory or Way of Life? Controversies in Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Eli Kramer (Brill, 2024).

18) See Hadot, "Foreword," xxvi, xxvii.

19) See Hadot, "Foreword," xxvii.

20) Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Belknap Press, 2002), 254.

the notion of PWL, we need to think about its connection with university philosophy in the past, present, and future. Indeed, it is not possible to fully understand today's configuration of university philosophy without considering its history. On the other hand, university philosophy (its teaching, research, and even outreach practices) can and perhaps should also learn from the challenge posed by Hadot and his followers.

Most importantly, even if Hadot's position about the university is too unilateral or controversial, it certainly invites us to a critical reflection on the work of intellectuals, researchers, or professors at the university. What are philosophers working at an academic institution supposed to do? What is their role, their function, the very goal of their profession? When it comes to philosophy, is there a contradiction between one's job and one's vocation? If so, is this conflict or contradiction necessary or somehow solvable? Is a practical and existential understanding of philosophy compatible with philosophical academic work? How can philosophy relate to the work academics are supposed to do, namely to publish, organize scientific events, coordinate research groups, or teach? When they write or teach, what exactly are they trying to transmit? What does it mean to convey philosophical contents to students? And how can academics share the knowledge that is produced in the university with society at large? Should this even be an important part of their work as academics? More generally, can PWL have a transformative impact on academic practices? If so, is this impact equally relevant to all the facets of university philosophy or is it more suitable to some of them (for instance, teaching and outreach)? On the other hand, might this attempt to transform academic practices through the PWL model have its own risks? Might it for example trivialize research on philosophy or reduce it to certain dimensions of it, to some specific problems and questions, or to only certain authors and/or periods of thought that are especially relevant to PWL? Or would it imply imposing a certain way of understanding and doing philosophy, not leaving room for other ways of conceiving it, for example pure theoretic and abstract philosophy, of which so many contemporary academics are not only practitioners but even eager advocates? Finally, does university philosophy exhaust all possibilities for philosophical practice today or can philosophy also be carried out outside of it? If so, how would the two relate to each other? Would they be in clear opposition, or could they somehow be made compatible and complement each other? This would ultimately lead us to the question of whether university is a good place to develop PWL or whether PWL should

be practiced independently and outside of it. Conversely, one might wonder whether PWL can be properly developed and reach its full potential if it divorces from university philosophy and all accountability, rigor, and depth academic inquiry provides, or whether this might even be the best environment for it to grow, provided perhaps that structural changes can be made.

These are some of the questions that, in one way or another, are directly or indirectly implied in the articles that constitute the first part of this thematic issue.

We begin our exploration of the tensional and complex relationship between PWL and the university in the period in which it first fully emerged, and which is most contested in PWL scholarship: the Medieval Period. Matteo Stettler in “Hadot Among the Medievalists: On the Historiography on ‘Intellectual Felicity’ in the Thirteenth Century,” masterfully shows how the Averroist notion of intellectual felicity exemplifies this tension: can the very bookish, close reading of the scholarly life provide a meaningful art of living, or merely the pretense of one? Stettler also well shows how both Medieval scholars misunderstand Hadot’s own mature view on this point, and how Hadot himself faced limitations because of his own perception of university life. Matthew Sharpe continues to explore this complex relationship by covering a subject and period too little explored in PWL literature, the eighteenth-nineteenth century German Research University. Sharpe argues in, “Philosophy as a Way of Life, the System, and the Advent of the Research University: Contributions Toward an Unwritten Chapter of the History of PWL,” that idealistic texts of this period, especially those reflecting on philosophy in the university, maintain strong PWL elements in their view of individual and societal cultivation via a *Bildungs* pedagogy. Sharpe also points to Hadot’s perhaps over dismissal of the recurrence of PWL in this period. That said, Sharpe ultimately argues in line with Hadot that “this *Bildung* is nevertheless subordinated to the pursuit of systematic, pure, or absolute knowledge in ways which pave the way to today’s expectations around what serious philosophy must be.” Finally, Gianfranco Ferraro brings this thematic into the present, exploring the crises “inherent in the University” that authors such as Jacques Derrida and Pierre Macherey have highlighted from a PWL perspective. He provides a provoking and compelling call for “philosophy as spirituality” within universities, as a utopian resistance site to the practices of the contemporary university, while still acknowledging the tensional relationships that limit, curtail, and contradict the ability to do that very work.

In the Discussion Section, we have an essay that is included in this thematic and closes our dialogue. The leading philosopher of higher education Leonard Waks, in “Philosophers: Academic Professionals or Wisdom-Loving Sages?,” lays out clearly the difference between philosophers as contemporary academic professionals and philosophers as lovers of wisdom (in and beyond the university). His questions for the essay are: “does Academia set a boundary for PWL that excludes philosophers as life-guiding sages as teachers and scholars? And does this boundary create a road-block in the development of PWL?” He provides a succinct and critically important account of the professionalization of philosophy in the nineteenth-twentieth century and the transaction costs it entailed for PWL, and compares it with a less read tradition of popular philosophy that continued alongside the university (though under-explored by scholars). He concludes by arguing that the very model of scholarly professional philosophers, in an isolated discipline, with a pure product of knowledge, is no longer tenable. The PWL field must avoid becoming part of the death trap of a rarified and outdated discipline. It can assist philosophy as a discipline in finding a new paradigm, one that ought to “re-embrace the humane civilizational values” of PWL in the broad sense.

In our Forum Section, we have two essays that bring one of the twentieth century’s most important thinkers on authoritarianism into dialogue with a key figure in Ukrainian thought, who is exploring our contemporary situation. The first is “Thinking, Totalitarianism, and Tribunals: The Notion of Responsibility in Repressive Regimes” by Andreea Norica Bălan. This essay is a vital contribution to research on totalitarianism, drawing on the foundational work of Hannah Arendt, as powerfully corroborated by the Ukrainian journalist Stanislav Aseyev. Cana Beverage follows up on this topic in “When ‘Things Fall Apart’: Thinking Through Absurdity with Arendt and Aseyev,” exploring the themes of absurdity in both thinkers. The essay argues that Aseyev provides a “pre-moral-political capacity of ‘thinking’ latent but never explicit in Arendt’s work: the power to cope with the absurd qua absurd.” We conclude this issue with the essay by Marcin Poręba, “From Teleology to Backward Causation: How Do They Contribute to Our Understanding of the Nature of Concepts?” This piece explores the concept of teleology, and its modern manifestation as function. It breaks down the problem with overly deterministic views of conceptual causation in favor of a probabilistic, future-oriented one.

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