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Hadot Among the Medievalists: Revisiting the Historiography on “Intellectual Felicity” in the Thirteenth Century

Abstract:

The reception of Hadot’s work on the tradition of spiritual exercises among historians of medieval philosophy has rarely produced the results one might reasonably have expected. In this revisitation of the historiography on the notion of “intellectual felicity,” I thus hope to be able first to provide a corrective to the faulty understanding that some medievalists still seem to have of Hadot’s contribution to the study of philosophy as a way of life in the Middle Ages, and second, to show how ongoing debates in medievalist circles might point us toward the possible limitations with Hadot’s own understanding of philosophy as a way of life and its history in and beyond the Middle Ages.

Keywords:

Hadot, intellectual felicity, medieval philosophy, Aristotle

Introduction

In his 2005 report on the historiography of the notion of *felicità intellettuale* or *mentale* (“intellectual” or “mental felicity”) in the Middle Ages, the Italian scholar Gianfranco Fioravanti noted that the ongoing discussion around this theme among medievalists had “a more ancient history [*una storia più antica*],” which relates to the works of Pierre Hadot and Juliusz Domański, whom Fioravanti credits for having popularized among contemporary medievalists what Hadot had written in *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* concerning the ancient notion of “philosophy as a way of life.”¹ Hadot’s interpretative proposal in this text, as Fioravanti notes, reconstructing one of its most controversial aspects:

Also incidentally touched upon medieval philosophy. Incidentally, yes, but rather heavily. According to Hadot, the model of philosophy present in the Greek-Roman world would have lost its basic characteristic with the triumph of Christianity, which appropriating it, would have in some sense emptied this model of its ethical-spiritual content, reducing it, in function of theology, to a mere instrument producing concepts and analyses... More precisely, this emptying would have fully realized in the late Middle Ages, with the birth of the university and the figure of the philosopher as university professor.²

As Hadot argued on several occasions, it is precisely this scholastic conception of philosophy that was passed down to us by the Middle Ages and still dominates our academic world, where, as the French scholar notes with great discontent, “philosophy is obviously no longer a way of life or a form of life – unless it be the form of life of a professor of philosophy.”³ Hadot was convinced that the life of a scholar or of a philosophy professor is no way or form of life at all – not in the ancient sense, at least. After all, as Hadot makes the case elsewhere,

1) Fioravanti, “La felicità intellettuale,” 3. All English translations from non-English sources, such as this one, are my own, unless otherwise stated.

2) Ibid., 4.

3) Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 271.

There is a radical opposition between the ancient philosophical school, which addressed individuals in order to transform their entire personality, and the university, whose mission is to give out diplomas which corresponded to a certain level of objectifiable knowledge... Furthermore, the university tends to make the philosophy professor a civil servant whose job, to a large extent, consists in training other civil servants. The goal is no longer, as it was in antiquity, to train people for careers as human beings, but to train them for career as clerks or professors – that is to say, as specialists, theoreticians, and retainers of specific items of more or less esoteric knowledge. Such knowledge, however, no longer involves the whole of life, as ancient philosophy demanded.⁴

Interestingly, whether contemporary philosophers are in a position today to reactivate the ancient notion of philosophy as a way of life remains a compelling possibility, one that seems to be as widely discussed among Hadotian scholars⁵ as the possibility that some medieval philosophers may have already attempted this in the thirteenth century is among contemporary medievalists. There is no doubt that contemporary projects to revive this ancient tradition would benefit from studying similar efforts made by the professional philosophers of the Middle Ages, precisely when, according to Hadot's narrative, that ancient metaphilosophical tradition entered its twilight years and the one that still dominates today's academia was inaugurated. Unfortunately, the study of medieval countertendencies to the decline of philosophy as a way of life has long remained in the dark about Hadot's pioneering works on the theme. As Fioravanti himself noted, Hadot's *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* did not receive much attention from historians of medieval philosophy at the time of its first appearance in 1981, with the notable exception of a review by

4) Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 260.

5) Among others, see the different perspectives laid out by Horn, "Tra antichi e moderni"; and Montanari, "Pierre Hadot," and more recently, also Faustino, "Philosophy as a Way of Life Today." On the usefulness of Greco-Roman philosophy in contemporary times of crisis, see the particularly insightful article by Chase, "Ancient Philosophy in a Time of COVID-19?" For the general framing of the problem, see Sharpe, Kramer, and Chase, "Philosophical Life in a Time of Crisis."

Ruedi Imbach published in 1983,⁶ to which we shall have to return. While Hadot's work on the ancient notion of philosophy as a way of life did eventually come to the forefront for some medievalists around the turn of the millennium, especially in the German-speaking world,⁷ there is a sense that the ensuing discussion has not always been as satisfying or productive as it could have been, and that an important opportunity to understand a neglected chapter in the history of philosophy as a way of life and appreciate its contemporary relevance was thus missed.

Many medievalists, even the otherwise impeccable Fioravanti,⁸ have been so focused on criticizing Hadot's original thesis on the medieval decline of philosophy as a way of life (rightly so), that they have often overlooked the important revision Hadot made to his thesis after his "spiritual encounter [*rencontre spirituelle*]" with the Polish scholar Juliusz Domański and his works.⁹ As we shall see, this revision aligns with the discourse on intellectual felicity developed by contemporary medievalists since the publication of Maria Corti's pioneering volume *La felicità mentale* in 1983.¹⁰ On the other hand, Hadotian scholars have yet to appreciate what Hadot's eventual acceptance of certain controversial interpretative positions currently debated by contem-

6) Fioravanti, "La felicità intellettuale," 4. Parenthetical additions mine. The latter is here referring to Imbach, "Philosophie als geistliche Übung," later translated in French as Imbach, "La philosophie comme exercice spirituel." By reviewing more recently Hadot's contributions, also Chase suggested that "more attention needs to be paid to Hadot's thesis of the decline of Philosophy as a Way of Life as a result of Medieval Scholasticism, Christianity, and the rise of the University." See Chase, "Observations on Pierre Hadot's conception," 282.

7) Fioravanti, "La felicità intellettuale," 4, n8, points the reader to Aertsen, "Mittelalterliche Philosophie" Speer, "Philosophie als Lebensform?," but we might add to the list also Aertsen, "Is There a Medieval Philosophy?," as well as the following contributions: Speer, "*Sapientia nostra*," 251–52; Speer, *Kindler Kompakt*, 27–28; and especially Darge, "Wie kann die Philosophie uns glücklich machen?"; Darge, "Kritische Betrachtungen"; and Darge, "Theorie als Lebensform."

8) Fioravanti thinks that in *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* – that is, a text that already bears the marks of his encounter with Domański's work on medieval philosophy and especially the Latin Averroists – Hadot proposes "a completely identical thesis [*una tesi del tutto identica*]" to the one defended in *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*. See Fioravanti, "La felicità intellettuale," 4. As we shall see, this is not really accurate. It is relevant that even in his recent introduction to his edition of Dante's *Convivio*, Fioravanti keeps considering Hadot's works as emblematic of his earlier thesis on the medieval decline of the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life. Fioravanti, Dante, *Convivio*, xxxvi.

9) Hadot, "Préface," in *Philosophie, théorie ou manière de vivre?*, vii.

10) Corti, *La felicità mentale*.

porary historians of medieval philosophy might itself mean for his own conceptualization of the ancient notion of “philosophy as a way of life” and the possibility of its contemporary rehabilitation. This is evident with the idea, advanced by medievalists like Alain De Libera and Carlos Steel, that in the thirteenth century there existed an indissoluble link between the contemplative model of intellectual felicity propounded by the Parisian *magistri* and what Fioravanti polemically calls “the doctrine, or the fabrication [*favola*], of the *copulatio* with the separate Intelligences.”¹¹ This investigation thus aims to revisit the historiography on the theme of intellectual felicity in the thirteenth century and point to its contemporary relevance. In doing so, I hope to correct the misunderstanding many contemporary medievalists still hold regarding Hadot’s contribution to the study of this neglected chapter in the history of philosophy as a way of life, and second, to show how the ongoing debates in medievalist circles might point to the possible limitations of Hadot’s own understanding of philosophy as a way of life in and beyond the Middle Ages.

1. The Two Dimensions of Hadot’s Project

Pierre Hadot’s *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* is often credited with inaugurating the modern scholarship on the notion of “philosophy as a way of life.”¹² In the essay after which this collection gets its title and his entire *oeuvre* its most representative leitmotif, Hadot not only redefines the essence of ancient philosophy around the practice of spiritual exercises but also sketches the historical conditions that led to the eventual disappearance of this conception of philosophy from the horizons of Western culture. It was precisely by these two dimensions – one metaphilosophical, the other historical¹³ – that Foucault’s interest in Hadot’s writings was initially sparked, and in some sense, the fortune of the latter’s career was eventually made also beyond clas-

11) Fioravanti, “La felicità intellettuale,” 10.

12) Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*. Translated in English as Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. In his, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, 36, Hadot does not hide the fundamental influence that Rabbow, *Seelenführung* and the works by his wife Ilsetraut Hadot exercised on his article “Exercices spirituels.”

13) That these are the two main theses of Hadot’s works was noted more recently also by Darge, “Theorie als Lebensform,” 14 and 18. Similarly, see also Aertsen, “Mittelalterliche Philosophie,” 13.

sicists' circles.¹⁴ As is well known, regarding the first, metaphilosophical dimension of his study, Hadot suggested that generally in ancient philosophy, and particularly in the Hellenistic-Roman schools,

Philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory – much less in the exegesis of texts – but rather in the art of living. It is a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence... It is a conversion which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it.¹⁵

In parallel to his attempt to reclaim a fundamental role for the practice of spiritual exercises in ancient philosophy, at the end of this essay, Hadot seeks to explain why and when this metaphilosophical conception disappeared from history.¹⁶ In Hadot's account, this is closely tied to the rise of Christianity and, in a first stage, to its assimilation of the exercises that originally constituted the philosophical life. In a second step, coinciding with the advent of medieval Scholasticism, as Hadot's narratives develops, Christian *theologia* became distinguished from pagan *philosophia*, with the former elevated to the status of a supreme science and the latter downgraded to an *ancilla theologiae* (handmaid of theology). The primary role of philosophy was now to provide theology with the conceptual – and thus purely theoretical – material to settle theological controversies arising from Christian doctrine. When philosophy

14) Hadot, "Reflections on 'Cultivation of the Self,'" 206.

15) As Hadot recognizes in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 82–83, looking back at his own contribution in "Exercices spirituels": "Foucault seems to have been particularly interested by the following points, which I developed in this article: the description of ancient philosophy as an art, style, or way of life; the attempt I made to explain how modern philosophy had forgotten this tradition, and had become an almost entirely theoretical discourse." Perhaps no one has so far taken greater care than Arnold I. Davidson to demonstrate how profoundly influential Hadot's works on the tradition of spiritual exercises eventually proved to be for the late Foucault. Davidson, "Spiritual Exercises and Ancient Philosophy," 480, has most famously argued that "in order to fully understand Foucault's motivations and his object of study (not only in his last two books, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, but also in a series of related essays that deals both with ancient philosophy and early Christianity), one must take into account the way in which Hadot's work on ancient spiritual exercises helped to form his entire project." On this, see also Davidson, "Ethics as Ascetics," and Davidson, "Introduction," in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, xxix, n21.

16) Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 107–108.

regained its autonomy in the modern era, Hadot concludes, it retained the tendency to function as a purely theoretical discipline.¹⁷

These two guiding themes of Hadot's article not only attracted Foucault's interest but also drew criticism from other philosophers. In his 1983 review of Hadot's collection of essays, Ruedi Imbach challenged both the metaphilosophical and historical aspects of Hadot's study.¹⁸ Concerning the first metaphilosophical dimension, as Imbach notes, "Hadot's studies encourage us to perceive the *unity* of ancient philosophy ... [in] a conversion ever-renewed by a spiritual practice."¹⁹ The Swiss scholar questions this interpretation by making a case for Aristotle's exceptionalism:

The author [that is, Hadot] includes Aristotle in his panorama of ancient philosophy. He rightly recalls that no idea of system guided Aristotle and that his writings were the fruit of school discussions and his teaching activity... But however, is it really a matter of spiritual exercises? Is it not precisely Aristotle who is the father of a purely theoretical conception which aims at knowledge for the sake of knowledge (*Met.*, I, 1–2)? Most assuredly, the Stagirite also wants to lead man to grasp and see the world differently, but to what extent does this new way of seeing lead to and aim at another way of being?²⁰

Moreover, even if we concede to Hadot that, from a *metaphilosophical* standpoint, also Aristotle's philosophy essentially constituted a way of life, Imbach argues that this would not change the fact that, from a *historical* perspective, Aristotle's works were not received that way by medieval Christians: "*In any case*," that is, whether or

17) Before Hadot's fundamental encounter with Domański's oeuvre in the 1990s – the significance of which we will discuss further later on – Hadot reiterated his initial thesis in another essay of the period. See Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 217–27, available in translation in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 269–72. Another account of Hadot's pre-Domański thesis on the decline of spirituality is offered in his preface to Juliusz Domański, *La philosophie, théorie ou manière de vivre?*, vii–viii. It is worth noting that an English edition of Domański's book has just been published. See Domański, *Philosophy, Theory or Way of Life?*

18) Imbach, "La philosophie comme exercice spirituel."

19) Ibid., 279.

20) Ibid., 281.

not Aristotle's philosophy itself constituted a way of life, as Imbach points out, "its historical impact confirms a purely theoretical apprehension of Aristotelian thought."²¹ This, according to the Swiss medievalist, presents a secondary challenge to Hadot's original narrative of the decline of spirituality:

The author tries to provide an answer to the question: for what reason and when did philosophy begin to become an exclusively theoretical approach? ... In my opinion, the idea according to which this paradigm shift occurred in the Middle Ages is correct but philosophy's role as a servant is not responsible for it; in my opinion, it is rather the reception of Aristotle in the XIII century that is to blame.²²

As we will see, Hadot's response to Imbach's concerns came swiftly, as he addresses them in detail in the postface to the second 1987 edition of *Exercices spirituels*, at a time when his encounter with Domański's research was already beginning to bear its fruits.²³

a. The Metaphilosophical Question: Aristotle's Exceptionalism

In response to Imbach's challenge regarding the metaphilosophical dimension of his study, Hadot claimed that if Aristotle's philosophy is indeed a philosophy of *theoria*, we should abstain from conceiving such *theoria* in modern terms as purely theoretic. This is because Aristotle, like any other ancient philosopher, understood contemplation and the apprehension of truth as the result of an *ascesis* (exercise), and because he viewed such *theoria* as itself a practice and mode of living.²⁴ The figure of the Stagirite is central to Hadot's account of ancient philosophy. For, as he makes clear in "La philosophie antique: une éthique ou une pratique?"²⁵ it is precisely the

21) Ibid., 281–82.

22) Ibid., 282. Similarly, see Speer, "Philosophie als Lebensform?," 21.

23) Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 235–39. On this, see more below in footnote 49.

24) Ibid., 235–36.

25) Hadot, "La philosophie antique," reprinted more recently in *Discours et mode de vie philosophique*.

borderline and seemingly problematic case of Aristotle – whose philosophy, more than any other, appears to constitute “a complete contradiction” of the thesis that antiquity as a whole conceived philosophy as a way of life²⁶ – that best captures the essence of ancient spirituality:

Aristotle, *in particular*, gives us the occasion to specify clearly what we mean when we affirm that ancient philosophy was a practical philosophy. One tends to think that Aristotle’s philosophy is essentially “theoretic,” for it truly aims at knowledge for the love of knowledge. There is, in this conception, a confusion between “theoretic” [*théorique*] and “theoretical” [*théorétique*]... For Aristotle ... the theoretical [*théorétique*] life is not a pure abstraction. It is a life of the mind which can certainly also utilize theoretic [*théorique*] discourse. Yet, it remains a life and a *praxis*.²⁷

Hadot later expands on this topic in a section of *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?* dedicated to “The ‘Theoretical’ Form of Life [*La forme de vie ‘théorétique’*],”²⁸ carefully distinguishing this philosophical way of life from the more mundane and certainly less ambitious “life of the scholar.”²⁹ According to Hadot, in fact: “It would be difficult to say that the activities of a ‘scholar’ include the activity of the mind which, according to Aristotle, is analogous, in certain privileged moments, to the activity of that first principle which is the Thought of Thought.”³⁰ In contrast to the scholar’s life, the theoretical form of life espoused by Aristotle and the members of his Lyceum included a universalist or transcendent dimension, which is one of the most distinctive features of Hadot’s recon-

26) Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 77.

27) Hadot, *The Selected Writings*, 71. Emphasis mine. On the theme, I take the liberty to redirect the reader to a forthcoming contribution of mine: Stettler, “Ancient Philosophy: An Ethics, a Practice, or a Way of Life? The Controversy on Aristotle.”

28) Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 77f.

29) Ibid., 81. Hadot’s target here is declaredly Düring, *Aristoteles*, 472.

30) Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 86.

struction of the ancient paradigm of philosophy as a way of life, especially when juxtaposed to Foucault's.³¹ As Hadot argues:

This form of life represents the highest form of human happiness. Yet it can also be said that such happiness is superhuman... This paradox corresponds to Aristotle's paradoxical and enigmatic view of the mind and the intellect: the intellect is what is most essential in man, yet at the same time it is something divine which enters into him; what transcends man constitutes his true personality. It is as if man's true essence consisted in being above himself... As in Plato, then, philosophical choice leads the individual self to go beyond its limits to a superior self, and to raise itself up to a universal point of view.³²

Although Hadot must admit, by referencing a passage from the *Metaphysics*, that this process of universalization or divinization of the self, in which the greatest human happiness resides, cannot be anything but temporary and fleeting:

When Aristotle wants to make us understand the mode of life of Thought – the first principle, upon which the world of the stars and sublunary nature depend – he declares: "Its way of life is comparable to what, for us, is the best way of life, which we can live only for short periods of time. For it always remains in this state, whereas for us this is impossible." ... The summit of philosophical happiness and of the activity of the mind – that is, the contemplation of the divine Intellect – is accessible to man only in rare moments for the *proprium* of the human condition is that it cannot be continuously in actuality.³³

However rare and temporary, according to Hadot, this universal or transcendent experience of the human intellect is what distinguishes the theoretic (*théorique*) concerns of the scholar from the theoretical (*théorétique*) vocation of an ancient philosopher

31) On the theme, see Wimberly, "The Joy of Difference."

32) Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 79. The same idea is reiterated in Hadot, "The Figure of the Sage," 190–91.

33) Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 80.

like Aristotle.³⁴ For, as he clearly puts it: “Nothing is farther from theory than the theoretical, or contemplation.”³⁵

b. The Historical Question: The Medieval Recovery of the *Corpus Aristotelicum*

As Fioravanti points out,³⁶ “the concept of intellectual felicity as a form of life had not yet made headway” in Imbach’s 1983 review of Hadot’s *Exercices spirituels*. However, this concept was really not long to come, as it was during the same year that the Italian scholar Maria Corti published her pioneering *La felicità mentale*,³⁷ thus inaugurating another interpretative model that could challenge Hadot’s thesis on the medieval decline of the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life, in addition to Imbach’s. Corti’s idea of “intellectual felicity,” as Calma concisely put it,

Is used to summarize the Scholastic appropriation of Averroes’ interpretation of Aristotle’s account in the *Nicomachean Ethics* concerning philosophy as the supreme good and source of happiness. According to some key figures of the thirteen and fourteenth century (such as Boethius of Dacia and Siger of Brabant), philosophy was an autonomous discipline, with its own set of rules, methods, and objects of knowledge, and the study of philosophy represented the highest form of living. It claims that those among us who do not practice philosophy should be counted among the beasts because they do not live according their true intellectual nature. Some scholars call this radical view “ethical Averroism.”³⁸

34) I here refer to the convention established by Michael Chase, when he translates Hadot’s French *théorique* with “theoretic” and *théorétique* with “theoretical.” See Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 293 n13. On this terminological point, see also the very explicative note of the translators in Hadot, *The Selected Writings*, 72.

35) Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 86.

36) Fioravanti, “La felicità intellettuale,” 4.

37) Corti, *La felicità mentale*. Before that, Corti had dealt with the theme in Corti, *Dante a un nuovo crocevia*.

38) Calma, “Metaphysics as a Way of Life,” 307. Similarly see Fioravanti, “La felicità intellettuale,” 6. The latter writes: “In a certain sense the cypher of the ‘mental happiness’ [felicità mentale] introduced by Maria Corti ... worked as a catalyst of interpretation and trends, the outcome of which could present itself as a response to Hadot’s theses: right at the beginning of its structuring as a public and university discipline,

When talking of an ethical Averroism, Calma is explicitly referring to the works of Alain De Libera, particularly, *Penser au Moyen Âge*,³⁹ whose interpretative proposal – namely, the identification of the spirit of medieval philosophy with these Parisian Masters⁴⁰ – is best understood by contrast to Hadot's own, as he explains in an interview with Jan Aertsen:

My point is better understood, I think, if we compare it to the thesis of Pierre Hadot, according to whom medieval scholasticism organized the divorce between theory and practice, philosophy and spirituality, choice of life and abstract knowledge. Speaking of the spirit of medieval philosophy, I wanted to emphasize that philosophy as a form of life, on the contrary, had not disappeared in the Middle Ages; that it had only changed its institutional location (the University, and no longer the Academy, the Lyceum, or the Porch).⁴¹

philosophy presents itself in the Middle Ages as a form of life, even as the highest form of life, consciously linking itself to the tradition of the classical world.” It is worth mentioning that Calma's objective in his article is to highlight a third model that critiques Hadot's narrative, which can be found in Heymericus de Campos's *Colliget principiorum iuris naturalis, divini et humani philosophice doctrinalium*. A similar aim motivated Kobusch, “Metaphysik als Lebensform,” 45ff. The latter is cited approvingly by Speer, “Philosophie als Lebensform?,” 6; and again in Speer, *Kindler Kompakt*, 28. The idea that Hadot's narrative of the decline of the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life in the Middle Ages may be challenged by considering the case of Severinus Boethius has been pointed out by Aertsen, “Is There a Medieval Philosophy?,” 391. Following the latter, see Harding, “Metaphysical Speculation.” More recently also Darge, “Theorie als Lebensform,” 22ff. I recently argued that some textual issues arising from the *Consolatio philosophiae* might be resolved by assuming that Boethius still conceived philosophy as a way of life: Stettler, “The τόπος of the Goods of Fortune.”

39) De Libera, *Penser au Moyen âge*. However, De Libera did not develop his thesis only on the basis of Corti's account in *La felicità mentale*, as pointed out by Bianchi, “Felicità intellettuale, «ascetismo» e «arabismo»,” 16. Moreover, as Fioravanti noted in “La felicità intellettuale,” 5, De Libera was not the only scholar to be influenced by “Corti's model [modello Corti].” See also, among others, the last chapter (“Virtù, felicità e filosofia”) in Bianchi, *Il vescovo e i filosofi* and Imbach, *Dante, la philosophie et les laïcs*. On the theme of intellectual felicity more generally, see Castellano, “La felicità speculativa.”

40) De Libera, *La philosophie médiévale*, 122.

41) De Libera and Aertsen, “Entretien avec Alain de Libera,” 172. It is also worth noting that De Libera's tendency to identify the “essence” of medieval philosophy in the *magistri artium*, rather than in Christian philosophy, was developed in polemics with Gilson. This was criticized in turn by Steel, “Medieval Philosophy: an Impossible Project?,” 171. Similarly, see also Emery and Speer, “After the Condemnation of 1277,” 8. On Steel, see also the considerations in Fioravanti, “La felicità intellettuale,” 8–9.

Although Hadot never interacted with Corti's work – nor systematically engaged with any of the scholars influenced by her account, such as Alain De Libera, until late in his career⁴² – he seems to have reached similar insights through the works of the Polish scholar Juliusz Domański.⁴³ In various places in his writings, Hadot explains that, after his “spiritual encounter”⁴⁴ with the Polish scholar in the late 1970s, he was prompted “to qualify this picture”⁴⁵ of the decline of the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life in the Middle Ages that he had painted early on in his career. According to Hadot, Domański's book *La philosophie, théorie ou manière de vivre?* has the “immense merit”⁴⁶ of isolating and rehabilitating the significance of what the Polish scholar (somewhat problematically)⁴⁷ views as an important *countertendency* to thirteenth-century Scholasticism: namely, the Latin Averroism of authors like Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia, who according to Domański, ensured philosophy's autonomy from Christian theology, refraining from considering the former as merely a propaedeutic to the latter. Particularly relevant for Hadot is the case of Boethius of Dacia, who rediscovers in his *De summo bono* “the ideal of the contemplative life professed by Aristotle in the last pages of the *Nicomachean Ethics*”⁴⁸ – a thesis appropriated by Hadot in the postface to the 1987

42) In *Penser au Moyen Age*, as Bianchi argues in “Felicità intellettuale, «ascetismo» e «arabismo»,” 16, n10, “De Libera openly acknowledged his debt to Italian historiography, referring in particular to M. Corti, *La felicità mentale*.” Compare Fioravanti, “La felicità intellettuale,” 5–6, n10, who notes De Libera's tendency to not explicitly signal to the reader the evident influence that Corti's account exercised on him.

43) Domański, *La philosophie, théorie ou manière de vivre?*

44) Hadot, “Préface,” in *La philosophie, théorie ou manière de vivre?*, vii.

45) Hadot, “Mes livres et mes recherches,” 374.

46) Hadot, “Préface,” in *La philosophie, théorie ou manière de vivre?*, x. It is important to note that the rediscovery of the contemplative ideal of intellectual felicity by the Latin Averroists cannot be attributed solely to Domański's research, just as it cannot be regarded as “De Libera's discovery,” as Emery and Speer have argued in “After the Condemnation of 1277,” 10. On this, see Bianchi, “Felicità intellettuale, «ascetismo» e «arabismo»,” 16.

47) Note that this very idea of considering Boethius of Dacia (one of the most eminent professional philosophers of his time), as part of a counter-scholastic tendency has given rise to its own sets of objections in the relevant literature. On this, see Bianchi, “Vae vobis homines,” 244–45, n52. Bianchi is here specifically reacting contra Lucia, “Unde Boetius in tractatu de summo bono dicit,” who in turn relies much on Hadot's and Domański's accounts. By the same scholar, see also Lucia, “La filosofia della consolazione.”

48) Hadot, “Préface,” in *La philosophie, théorie ou manière de vivre?*, x–xi.

edition of *Exercices spirituels* as a response to Imbach's 1983 critical review of the first edition of his volume.⁴⁹ In that context, Hadot writes:

R. Imbach also asks me if the reason why philosophy became purely theoretic in the Middle Ages might not be the reception of Aristotle in the 13th century... In a sense, the reception of Aristotle in the thirteenth century rather gave a boost to the idea of a philosophical life independent of theology, as appears in the work, written around 1270, by Boethius of Dacia: "On the Sovereign Good or on the Philosophical Life." ... Boethius of Dacia ... sees here the possibility of a philosophical life distinct from the Christian life and therefore of a return to the philosophical life as it had been described by the ancient philosophies.⁵⁰

Hadot's eventual change of mind is why Jan Aertsen and other early twenty-first century scholars of medieval philosophy considered him part of a "new tendency in the study of medieval philosophy" – a tendency that sees the spirit or essence of medieval philosophy in the Faculty of Arts – of which Alain De Libera is regarded as the main "representative."⁵¹ That is also why these scholars would go on to connect Hadot's and De Libera's interpretative proposals.

As will be argued, there may be more than their shared focus on the *magistri* of the Parisian University that unites De Libera's understanding of intellectual felicity and Hadot's account of the rediscovery of the notion of philosophy as a way of life in the Middle Ages. "Throughout the history of Western philosophy," Hadot writes in *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, which can very well be considered his last word on the subject,

49) One may wonder, given the timeline of sources, how Hadot could have drawn on Domański's re-evaluation of Latin Averroism as a fundamental countertendency against Medieval Scholasticism in his 1987 reply to Imbach, when Domański's *La philosophie* was only published in 1996. The explanation seems to live in the fact that, as Hadot explains in his "Préface" to *La philosophie, théorie ou manière de vivre?*, viii–ix, he had been familiar – albeit "imperfectly" – with Domański's works at least since 1977.

50) Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 236.

51) Aertsen, "Is There a Medieval Philosophy?," 386. From the same author, see also Aertsen, "Mittelalterliche Philosophie," 13. Similarly, also Emery and Speer, "After the Condemnation of 1277," 8, and Speer, "*Sapientia nostra*," 251–52. On the association of the theses of the two French scholars, see Fioravanti, "La felicità intellettuale," 6, n12.

We note a certain permanence and survival of the ancient notion. From the Middle Ages to today, some philosophers have remained faithful to the vital, existential dimension of ancient philosophy. At times, they have been active in the very heart of the university, but *more often* they were reacting against it. Sometimes they acted alone, but *generally* they did so from bases which were foreign to the university, such as certain religious or secular communities. . . . Thanks to translations of Aristotle made from Greek and Arabic, professors in the Faculties of Arts had been able to read nearly all the works of a philosopher from antiquity. It is highly significant that, thanks to these texts, they discovered once again that philosophy is not only discourse but a way of life. This fact is all the more interesting in that the philosopher in question is Aristotle, the philosopher usually considered a pure theoretician. With great perspicacity, however, the Aristotelian commentators saw that the essential point of philosophy for the “Philosopher” was precisely to devote oneself to a life of research, a life of contemplation, and *above all an effort to assimilate oneself to the divine Intellect* [surtout à l’effort d’assimilation à l’Intellect divin]. . . . We find the same attitude in Dante and in Meister Eckhart.⁵²

While explicitly influenced by Domański’s work,⁵³ Hadot’s understanding of this complex historical juncture also seems to carry the distinctive marks of the narrative developed by De Libera in *Penser au Moyen Âge*, to which Hadot specifically directs the reader in the footnote to the passage cited above. There are two main ideas that Hadot

52) Hadot, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, 393. My emphases. English translation in Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 261–62. In his article “Philosophy as a Way of Life,” 270, included in the homonymous collection of essays, Hadot had included Meister Eckhart in the tradition of Neoplatonic mysticism, where the notion of “philosophy as a way of life” survived in the Middle Ages. This was found “an interesting interpretation” by Perillo, “Dio è ‘il nulla, né questo né quello,’” 7. Following Hadot, also Vannini, *Prego Dio che mi liberi da Dio* made the claim that “Christian mysticism [is] the true heir of ancient philosophy.” See also Vannini, “Umanesimo versus religione,” 181.

53) Only few pages earlier in *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 254, Hadot had admitted his debt to Domański. “Thanks to the work of Juliusz Domański, I have been able to correct the overly brief and inexact presentation of the ‘theoreticizing’ of philosophy I had proposed in previous studies. . . . I must admit that the rediscovery of philosophy as a way of life was not as late as I had stated, and that it too began to be sketched in the medieval universities.”

appears to have drawn from De Libera's account. First, the idea that the significance of the rediscovery of the idea of philosophy as a way of life in the thirteenth century by professional philosophers such as Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia is later overshadowed by the relevance of the so-called "de-professionalization" (*déprofessionalisation*) of this notion of philosophy.⁵⁴ In other terms, Hadot seems to have been persuaded by De Libera's idea that it is only outside the walls of medieval universities that the ideal of intellectual felicity reaches its fullest and finest expression.⁵⁵

Moreover, here as in Aristotle's case, what distinguishes the Latin Averroists from mere scholars in Hadot's eyes – and simultaneously grants them the title of heirs of the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life – is not so much their commitment to theoretical activities as the universalist and transcendent aspirations that seemingly animated their life-project: namely, their attempt to achieve a state of assimilation or union with a divine Intelligence.⁵⁶ While Hadot's formula *per se* does not seem to automatically assume any specific doctrinal commitment from the *magistri*, his close dependence on *Penser au Moyen Âge* in this specific passage of *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* raises the suspicion that – alongside the notion of the de-professionalization of the ideal of the philosophical life – Hadot may have stumbled upon and found confirmation of his own conceptualization of philosophy as a way of life in one of the most controversial aspects of Alain De Libera's works on the subject: namely, the identity that the French medievalist establishes between intellectual felicity and the doctrine of the conjunction (*copulatio* or *coniunctio*) with the agent Intellect, from which, in the philosophical discourse of the time, the knowledge of the separated substances was said to derive.

2. The *Favola* (Fabrication) of the Assimilation to the Separated Substances

In 1990, Alain De Libera concluded his study *Albert le Grand et la philosophie* by confirming Bruno Nardi's thesis concerning Albert the Great's influence on some of

54) Among other places, see De Libera, *Penser au Moyen âge*, 12–13. This is considered a "debatable" (*discutibile*) aspect of De Libera's proposal by Bianchi, "Felicità intellettuale, «ascetismo» e «arabismo»," 16,

55) De Libera, *Penser au Moyen âge*, 24.

56) That "the theory [of the scholastics] is still an activity, an *energeia*" was already noted by Porro, "Introduzione all'edizione italiana," in *Dante, la filosofia e i laici*, xviii.

the central tenets of the so-called Latin Averroists.⁵⁷ According to the French scholar, the theory of intellectual felicity that Albert developed on the basis of Arabic sources, especially al-Farabi, was eventually adopted by “the majority of those who, since Renan, have been called ‘Averroists,’” all of whom professed “the Albertist doctrine of philosophical contemplation, purely intellectual and metaphysical knowledge, realizing in this life a union of man with God and with the separate substances, thanks to study and the exercise of thought.”⁵⁸ In other terms, as De Libera synthetically puts it,

The doctrine of “mental felicity” is the theoretical justification of a living practice of philosophy pioneered by Albert the Great and his epigones [namely, the Averroists], near or far, faithful or unfaithful. Its originality is to be a philosophical humanism rooted both in a unitive experience of the transcendent, which remains properly philosophical, and in the thesis of general anthropology drawn from the *Nicomachean Ethics* by Albert, according to which “man, insofar as it is man, is nothing but intellect.”⁵⁹

It is against this backdrop that, according to De Libera, we should understand the antagonistic relationship established between philosophy and Christian theology in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: “not a representation or a dead concept of philosophy opposed to a *living practice of theology* and theological faith, but two practices, two constituted and directive ideals of life.”⁶⁰ This provides a possible explanation for the condemnations of the bishop Tempier, an interpretation later adopted also by Piché’s influential account in *La condamnation parisienne de 1277*.⁶¹ The Latin Averroists represented a threat to the bishop of Paris, so this interpretation goes, because they proposed a conception of philosophy tied to the contemplation of the divine that was bound to worry the theologians of the time, who would

57) See, for instance, Nardi, “Note per una storia dell’Averroismo Latino.”

58) De Libera, *Albert le Grand et la philosophie*, 268.

59) Ibid., 269. De Libera reiterates the same claim in virtually all his successive writings on the theme: De Libera, “Averroïsme éthique et philosophie mystique,” 38; De Libera, *Raison et foi*, 323–24; and De Libera, *Métaphysique et noétique*, 335.

60) De Libera, “Averroïsme éthique et philosophie mystique,” 37.

61) Piché, *La condamnation parisienne de 1277*, 259.

see in it “an unfair competition, the formidable affirmation of another way, philosophical and – why not? – laic, towards ascetism.”⁶² That “in the thirteenth century the conflict between theologians and the Parisian masters reached its climax in the moral sphere, precisely because here they ended up confronting each other on the same ground, thus entering into competition,”⁶³ as Alain De Libera argues, was nothing new for Luca Bianchi. In 1990, the Italian scholar had already revised an early intuition by Fioravanti,⁶⁴ pointing out that the positions assumed by the radical Aristotelians of the Faculty of Arts on the subject of intellectual felicity “could not fail to arouse alarm among theologians, worried by the competition of a philosophy that was also becoming an ‘*itinerarium mentis in Deum*,’ however conceived as a ‘natural’ cognitive experience, even if in fact reserved to the very few.”⁶⁵ While largely agreeing with De Libera on the centrality of the “*enjeu éthique*” (ethical issue) in the condemnations of 1277,⁶⁶ Bianchi questioned the solidity of the connections that De Libera assumed between the ideal of the philosophical life proposed by the Parisian *magistri*, that is, the model of intellectual felicity, and the Averroist doctrine of the *copulatio* or *coniunctio* with the agent Intellect. “Because of the 1277 condemnations,” as Ebbesen noted early on in a similar vein, tacitly referring to Alain De Libera’s reading,

62) De Libera, *Penser au Moyen âge*, 223–24. “It was this model of philosophical contemplation that was a danger to the Christian life, and it was it [that is, this model] which represented not a double, but another truth – another relationship to truth, in which lay people could engage.” De Libera, *Penser au Moyen âge*, 137. Largely following De Libera, see also Cervera Novo, “La concepción aristotélica,” 6, and Cervera Novo, “El renacimiento del ascetismo en Jacobo de Pistoia,” 316. One of the main downsides of arguing, as Darge does, against the scholarly consensus that the *magistri*, and in particular Boethius of Dacia, did not rehabilitate a notion of “philosophy as a way of life” in the Middle Ages is that we are forced to abandon one of the most persuasive explanations available for the condemnations of 1277. See Darge, “Theorie als Lebensform.” That Boethius of Dacia’s rediscovery of philosophy as a way of life was only “partial” was claimed recently by Sharpe and Ure, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 318.

63) Bianchi, “Felicità intellettuale, «ascetismo» e «arabismo»,” 18.

64) In Fioravanti, “Boezio di Dacia, De summo bono,” 19, the scholar defined Boethius of Dacia’s *De summo bono* as an “*itinerarium mentis in Deum*,” noting that “the love which it produces is itself very similar to the *amor Dei intellectualis*.”

65) Bianchi, “Gli aristotelismi della scolastica,” 25.

66) Bianchi, “Felicità terrena e beatitudine ultraterrena.” Similar positions were defended in Bianchi, “La felicità intellettuale come professione,” and Bianchi, *Il vescovo e i filosofi*, 149–95.

Scholarship has had a tendency to focus on claims to the effect that the ultimate reward for good study is some sort of union with an impersonal super-intellect. It would be foolish to deny that such claims occur. But I think the attention paid to this particular piece of doctrine tends to make us blind to the bigger picture. Some arts masters believed in a union with a superior-intellect, some did not, and those who did believe in it did not at all believe in the same sort of union or, for that matter, in the same sort of super-intellect. But they all believed in the salutary effects of knowledge, and most or all of them believed that a total or almost total knowledge of the created world is possible, at least in principle.⁶⁷

Taking a similar stance against Alain De Libera – but implicitly also against Carlo Steel, who had appropriated the results of both Hadot’s and De Libera’s analyses to make his controversial point on the “impossibility of philosophy” in the Middle Ages⁶⁸ – Bianchi more recently concluded that, in the thirteenth century, “there were a multiplicity of ways of understanding the theme of intellectual felicity”; that this theme is not – to use Fioravanti’s words – “inextricably linked to the doctrine, or to the fabrication, of the *copulatio* with the separate Intelligences;” and, finally, “that behind the insistent and sometimes repetitive exaltation of philosophy as a perfect form of life, there were hidden different ideas, theoretical concerns and sensitivities.”⁶⁹

As for Siger of Brabant, it has been noted that the clearly Averroist doctrine of intellectual felicity that, according to the (very possibly unreliable) testimony of Agostino Nifo, Siger supposedly defended in his now lost treatises *De intellectu* and *De felicitate* does not easily square with the other writings of the master that have come down to us, such as his *Quaestiones in metaphysicam*, in which he clearly recognizes the limits of human beings’ knowledge of the First Principle.⁷⁰ For what concern Boethius, as Bianchi noted, in the wake of Fioravanti, he

67) Ebbesen, “Radulphus Brito,” 237.

68) Steel, “Medieval Philosophy: an Impossible Project?.” Similarly, also Steel, “Siger of Brabant versus Thomas Aquinas.”

69) Bianchi, “Felicità intellettuale, «ascetismo» e «arabismo»,” 32, is here citing Fioravanti, “La felicità intellettuale,” 10.

70) Fioravanti, “La felicità intellettuale,” 10–11. Similarly, also Bianchi, “L’Averroismo di Dante,” 98.

Welcomes and develops the Aristotelian thesis that man finds his supreme happiness in philosophical contemplation, but unlike his other colleagues he does so without even mentioning the interpretation that Averroes had given of this thesis: he never evokes the agent and possible Intellect, whose status and function are crucial in Averroes' thought, never analyzes the different degrees of the Intellect (*adeptus*, *speculativus*, or *in habitu*), nor does he ever use the language of *coniunctio* or *copulatio*, but rather speaks of man's knowledge, admiration and love for the First Principle, openly identified with the Christian God.⁷¹

Things do not change if we shift our attention from Paris to Bologna. In the *Questio de felicitate* dedicated to the poet of the *Stil novo* Guido Cavalcanti, Giacomo da Pistoia does identify human happiness with the knowledge of the noblest objects, namely the separated substances and God. However, he does not present this contemplation as the result of an assimilation or unification with these substances.⁷² So, "No *continuat*io, no *copulatio*, no holy or *adeptus* intellect, appear in these lines," concluded Fioravanti, studying the works of Masters like Siger of Brabant, Boethius of Dacia, and Giacomo da Pistoia. "The exercise of the intellect that gives bliss in all of these authors seems ... to be identified, in a strictly Aristotelian manner, with the possession of the three branches of theoretical knowledge: physics, mathematics, and, at the top, metaphysics."⁷³ This, as Falzone has recently shown,⁷⁴ would seem to apply also to a laic like Dante Alighieri, who according to De Libera, merits recognition for having "thought for the first time in all its extent the form of the experience achieved in philosophical contemplation: the *felicità mentale*."⁷⁵

71) Bianchi, "Felicità intellettuale, «ascetismo» e «arabismo»," 27. Similarly also Fioravanti, "La felicità intellettuale," 10, and, more recently, Fioravanti, "Fare filosofia," 151.

72) Fioravanti, "La felicità intellettuale," 12. More recently, also Fioravanti, "Fare filosofia," 152. Similarly, Bianchi, "L'Averroismo di Dante," 102.

73) Fioravanti, "La felicità intellettuale," 12.

74) Falzone, *Desiderio della scienza*, 168–69. Following the latter, also Bianchi, "Noli comedere panem philosophorum inutiliter," 353. On the same theme, more recently, also Falzone, "Il Convivio di Dante," 245. Similarly, see also Porro, "Tra il 'Convivio' e la 'Commedia'"; Porro, "Avegna che pochi, per male camminare, compiano la giornata"; and Fioravanti, "Desiderio e limite della conoscenza in Dante."

75) De Libera, *Penser au Moyen âge*, 24.

Conclusions

It is striking how far apart Fioravanti's and Hadot's respective positions are on this issue. As discussed, for Hadot, not only the rediscovery of the contemplative way of living by the medieval masters is inextricably linked to a unitive experience with the divine, but what actually elevates these philosophers above the rank of mere scholars and allows them to reclaim a place in the history of philosophy as a way of life is precisely that transcendent dimension of their project: their efforts to assimilate themselves to a divine Intellect. In contrast, Fioravanti claims that none of this is the case. For the Italian medievalist, not only the paradigm of intellectual felicity and the *coniunctio* are not systematically associated among the so-called Latin Averroists, but whenever they happen to be, as they sometimes are, this association actually casts doubts on the credibility of the aspirations these professional philosophers claimed to entertain, suggesting that no actual exercise or effort supported their ascetic life-project.⁷⁶ In other words, as previously hinted, the assimilation to the agent Intellect that some – and only some! – of these *magistri* purported to pursue might be nothing more than a “fabrication” (*favola*) designed to promote the interests of their professional corporation, as Fioravanti puts it.⁷⁷

Now, Plotinus' affirmations on the attainment of the One or Augustine's experience in Ostia may still arouse our interest, but a corporation of university professors who, as Pomponazzi will ironize, “cotidie prandent cum Deo” can only have an estranging effect on us and arouse the

76) According to Fioravanti, this question would seem to be especially relevant in the case of the Bolognese Masters of the fourteenth century, such as Matteo da Gubbio, Taddeo da Parma, and Giacomo da Piacenza, precisely because, unlike the Parisian of the thirteenth century, these fourth generation Averroists seem to have unanimously followed John of Jandun in subscribing to the doctrine of the *coniunctio*. Fioravanti, “Fare filosofia,” 151. On this, see Ghisalberti, “Fine ultimo e conoscenza intellettuale,” and Sorge, “Per una topica della felicità.” This led Fioravanti to go as far as to question whether, for Bolognese Averroists such as these, the strict ascetic regimen of control of sensual pleasures and desires – one that usually stood as the precondition of the *coniunctio* – could have represented anything more than a “harmless philosophical topos.” Fioravanti, “Fare filosofia,” 153.

77) Fioravanti, “La felicità intellettuale,” 10.

suspicion of the existence of an ideological propaganda behind which it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to identify any real practice.⁷⁸

More in general, as Fioravanti reflects on the problem elsewhere:

The question remains open whether and to what extent the concrete teaching activity of a philosophy professor – including career, legal and economic relationships with colleagues and the authorities, and also penal quarrels and disputes – could approach the model of the speculative life of the philosopher of which these masters presented themselves as exponents and heralds.⁷⁹

We now see that Fioravanti shifts the terms of the debate initially sparked by Hadot's thesis on the medieval decline of the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life. The question is no longer whether the works of the Parisian *magistri* were presented as recuperating the ancient ideal of the philosophical life, because they most certainly were (suffice it here to note the full title of Boethius' *De summo bono sive de vita philosophi*). As I have argued, unbeknownst to some medievalists, the late Hadot himself eventually arrived at the same conclusion via the works of the Polish scholar Juliusz Domański. The real question is now whether a genuine practice and effort underpinned that ideal or if it was merely a scheme more or less consciously devised by these professional philosophers to gain social recognition, economic power, and academic standing during a time when philosophy was experiencing an evident crisis of identity. Answering this question will be especially relevant for historians of

78) Ibid. That the ideal of intellectual felicity of these masters has to be reinserted in the institutional context of its emergence, namely the Faculty of the Arts, and thus must be understood, first of all, as the expression of the professional consciousness of these *magistri* was argued by Bianchi in "La felicità intellettuale come professione."

79) Fioravanti, "Fare filosofia," 151. On some possible tensions between the notions of philosophy as intellectual felicity and as a profession, see Fioravanti, "Introduzione," in Dante, *Convivio*, xxxvi–xxxvii, where Fioravanti corrects the thesis of the earlier Hadot. Similarly, see Fioravanti, Dante, *Convivio*, 379, where he comments on *Convivio*, III.XI.10. Also, contra Hadot (and Domański) on this point, Bianchi, "Felicità intellettuale, «ascetismo» e «arabismo»," 19, and Bianchi, "Vae vobis homines," 244–45, n52. On a similar tension, already early on also De Libera, *Penser au Moyen âge*, 11–12.

medieval philosophy studying the paradigm of intellectual felicity in the Middle Ages. However, it also holds significance for contemporary academic philosophers who, in their attempts to rehabilitate ancient philosophical ways of life or in merely singing their praises, must now demonstrate that their endeavors are guided by a genuine commitment to the practice itself, rather than a fleeting enthusiasm for the latest academic trend or the desperate need to remain relevant in a contemporary world that increasingly questions the purpose of philosophy.

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