

DOI:10.14394/eidos.jpc.2024.0023

Lucas Nascimento Machado
Department of Philosophy
University of Campinas, Brazil
lucasmachado47@gmail.com

To Know Is To Be
– Wisdom in Philosophy as a Way of Life and Its
Implications for our Understanding of Knowledge

Abstract:

In my paper, I attempt to show how the Hadotian metaphilosophical perspective of philosophy as a way of life (PWL for short) implies another conception of what true, philosophical knowledge is: a conception that one should understand through Hadot's reading of what is *Sophia* for ancient philosophy. To do so, I present my account of PWL according to Hadot as a way of understanding philosophy in which the way of life comes first and the discourse comes second and which is practiced fundamentally through the spiritual exercises of attention to the present moment and cosmic consciousness. Through this exposition, I show that the PWL conception of knowledge is one in which to know is to be that which is known. I then connect this discussion to contemporary philosophical debate and critique of our current society by Byung-Chul Han and Ailton Krenak, pointing out how the PWL conception of knowledge is relevant to that debate and, thus, crucial for the reflection on alternatives to the way we live today, led by demands of productivity and utility.

Keywords:

philosophy as a way of life, philosophical discourse, *sophia*, know-how, spiritual exercises, attention to the present, cosmic consciousness

Introduction

In his *What is Ancient Philosophy?*,¹ Hadot presents us with an exposition of our current understanding of philosophy and how it contrasts, according to him, with the ancient understanding of it. According to Hadot, after modernity philosophy is understood first and foremost as a discourse, and the teaching of philosophy is understood to be the teaching of the conceptual systems elaborated by philosophers throughout history. Thus, one learns philosophy by learning the philosophical systems, for instance of structuralism, existentialism, Marxism, and so on. In learning and understanding those philosophical discourses, there is no need to draw out practical implications for our lives for, if philosophy is done at the level of discourse, to learn philosophy one has merely to understand the philosophical discourses propounded by different philosophers and philosophical schools. One can, however, after learning those philosophies, ponder about the practical implications of those discourses, and should he find himself adhering to one or another of those discourses, implement their practical implications in one's own life. Thus, according to this modern understanding of philosophy, discourse comes first, and way of life second.²

It is, however, precisely this understanding of philosophy that Hadot deems inadequate to understanding the ancient way of conceiving philosophy; for ancient philosophers, according to Hadot, the choice for a determinate way of life did not come after the elaboration of a sophisticated philosophical discourse; rather, it was the choice for a certain way of living that motivated the elaboration of a philosophical discourse in the first place, as a consequence of adhering to this way of life. Thus, in this conception of philosophy, which Hadot considers to be the ancient way of understanding it, way of life comes first, and philosophical discourse second. It is not the philosophical discourse that serves as the basis for practical implications for our lives, but rather the choice for a certain way of living that provides the basis and the grounding of its corresponding philosophical discourse.³

1) Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*

2) Ibid., 2.

3) Ibid., 4.

Hadot's turnabout of the modern understanding of philosophy, I believe, has profound implications for the way we understand what knowledge is and what sorts of knowledge we prioritize. In fact, I believe it to be impossible to truly grasp the meaning of Hadot's understanding of philosophy as a way of life without understanding the deep implications it has for the way we understand what knowledge is. In fact, I believe that the implications of Hadot's conception of PWL, regarding our conception of knowledge, have often been neglected or ignored, in such a way that even adepts of the PWL understanding of philosophy often misread it by interpreting PWL in terms of a conception of knowledge that is not appropriate to it.

In my paper, I will explore the implications of Hadot's conception of PWL for our understanding of what knowledge is, in order to indicate how this other understanding of knowledge provided by PWL has serious consequences, not only to the scholarly studies of the history of philosophy and of PWL as such, but also to the way we understand and deal with knowledge in our society today.

What is Philosophy as a Way of Life?

In order to begin, we have first to clarify PWL according to our reading of Hadot. We have already pointed out that central to this conception of philosophy is that way of life comes first and the philosophical discourse only second in relation to it. This has a fundamental implication that has to be clear from the beginning: it is not the connection of a way of life to a philosophical discourse that makes that way of life philosophical. Rather, it is the connection of a discourse to a philosophical way of life that makes the discourse itself philosophical. Thus, that which defines what is philosophical is not a certain mode of discourse, but rather a certain way of living. This is very important to stress, as it would be possible to agree with Hadot that philosophy is a way of life, and yet, depart from him in this aspect by considering that different ways of life are to be considered more or less philosophical depending on the level of connection they have with philosophical discourse, understood in terms of rational, argumentative discourse. Yet, in Hadot's understanding, philosophy is not a property of a discourse that can be transferred to a way of life, but rather the other way around, such that it is possible to lead a perfectly philosophical way of life irrespective of any elaborate use or articulation of a philosophical discourse. As Hadot puts it, there is an

incommensurability between philosophical discourse and philosophical life because, “for the ancients, one was a philosopher not because of the originality or abundance of the philosophical discourse which one conceived or developed, but as a function of the way one lived.”⁴ What is truly philosophical is not what one says, but rather what one does with one’s life: how one lives one’s own life. This is why, according to this conception, it is the discourse that is only philosophical if it is connected to a philosophical way of life, that is to say, if it is the expression and result of adopting a philosophical way of life.⁵

Of course, one could ask, then: if what defines philosophy is not being a certain kind of discourse, but rather a certain way of life, which way of life is the philosophical way of life? Here, we can already discard another often misapprehension of Hadot’s understanding of PWL; for, when one speaks of philosophy as a way of life, one is often led to the impression that every way of life has its own philosophy, and thus, that every way of life is philosophical. Yet, this understanding is also inadequate to Hadot’s understanding of PWL not only because for Hadot not every way of life is philosophical, but also because such understanding of philosophy is incompatible with the idea that what defines philosophy is the way of life, and not the discourse. For, when one says that every way of life has a philosophy, one already means by “philosophy” the conceptual presuppositions of a way of life, and thus, one is already assuming that philosophy is defined, first and foremost, by its conceptual dimension. In order to fully grasp Hadot’s conception of PWL, one has thus to acknowledge that philosophy is a specific way of life, that distinguishes itself from other ways of living.

But which way is that? Here, we first have to resort, as Hadot does, to the etymology of the word “philosophy.” If philosophy is, accordingly, the love of wisdom, of *sophia*, then the philosophical way of life is the one aimed at searching for wisdom. This might lead, at first, to the impression that our whole distinction between the

4) Ibid., 172.

5) “This existential option, in turn, implies a certain vision of the world, and the task of philosophical discourse will therefore be to reveal and rationally justify this existential option, as well as this representation of the world. Theoretical philosophical discourse is thus born from this initial existential option, and it leads back to it, insofar as-by means of its logical and persuasive force, and the action it tries to exert upon the interlocutor – it incites both masters and disciples to live in genuine conformity with their initial choice. In other words, it is, in a way, the application of a certain ideal of life.” (Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 3)

philosophical way of life and the philosophical discourse falls apart with this characterization of philosophy. For, if the philosophical way of life is the one that looks for *sophia*, how is it that the philosophical discourse could be a secondary, even negligible part of it? To search for wisdom would not amount to any search for the sort of knowledge provided by philosophical discourse. Yet, this is precisely the point that has to be fully understood in order to understand both the specificity of Hadot's conception of PWL and its implications for our understanding of knowledge. The *sophia* that is searched for by philosophy here is not knowledge in the way we are accustomed to understanding it when talking about philosophical knowledge. And so, to fully understand Hadot's understanding of philosophy as the way of life that searches for wisdom, we have to understand what Hadot himself considers to be wisdom: as the specific sort of knowledge that ancient philosophers strived for.

Knowing How to Live: Sophia as a Know-How

In chapter 2 of *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, we find one of the most significant passages of the book for the understanding of knowledge in the terms of PWL. There, when discussing the very term *sophia* itself, Hadot says:

When trying to define *sophia*, modern commentators always hesitate between the notion of knowledge and that of wisdom. Was the person who was *sophos* one who knew and had seen many things, had traveled a great deal, and was broadly cultured, or was he rather the person who knew how to conduct himself in life and who lived in happiness? As we shall see often in the course of this work, these two notions are not at all mutually exclusive. In the last analysis, real knowledge is know-how, and true know-how is knowing how to do good.⁶

Here we find sketched the fundamental outlines through which one has to move beyond a modern, discursive conception of knowledge, if one is to truly grasp the kind of *sophia* that philosophy as love of *sophia* strives for. In this passage, *sophia*

6) Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 17–18.

is indeed conceived as a sort of knowledge, but a knowledge that is not primarily of the discursive kind. Rather, it is a sort of know-how, of *technê* (i.e., a practical knowledge), such as that of an artisan.⁷ Here, we can begin to understand why philosophy as a way of life implies the principle that way of life comes first, discourse second. For, although the use of a discourse can be useful to the teaching of a certain know-how, it is never identical to the know-how itself, which can never be fully encapsulated in a discourse. To clarify this irreducible difference between discursive knowledge and know-how, one can resort to a classical text from a Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi,⁸ where he speaks from the perspective of a wheelwright, who presents the point of view that one cannot express through language the kind of knowledge that really matters, (i.e., knowledge as know-how):

I look at it from the point of view of my own work. When I chisel a wheel, if the blows of the mallet are too gentle, the chisel slides and won't take hold. But if they're too hard, it bites in and won't budge. Not too gentle, not too hard – you can get it in your hand and feel it in your mind. You can't put it into words, and yet there is a knack to it somehow. I can't teach it to my son and he can't learn it from me. So I've gone along for seventy years and at my age I am still chiseling wheels. When the men of old died they took with them the things that couldn't be handed down. So what you are reading there must be nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old.⁹

This passage is very significant because it shows, very intuitively, what one should have in mind when we speak of know-how, and the way it is clearly distinct from discursive

7) This might be why, in the *Apology* of Socrates, Socrates does not deny that the artisans possess some sort of knowledge – in fact, he grants that they do know many good and useful things. See Plato, *Apology*, 22c-e.

8) Although Hadot himself did not write any work specifically on PWL in non-Western traditions such as Chinese philosophy, I feel more than authorized in resorting to a quote from this tradition to illustrate Hadot's understanding of PWL considering that he himself quotes more than once, in *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, excerpts from what he himself names as “texts of Chinese philosophy” (see Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 206); not to mention that he himself draws, especially in the last chapters of the book, connections between ancient Greek philosophy and Eastern philosophy (see *ibid.*, chpts. 9, 12, and Conclusion).

9) Zhuangzi, *Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 152–53.

knowledge: to know how to chisel the wheel is not to know how to talk about chiseling the wheel; there is just no way of saying exactly just how hard or just how gentle the blow of the mallet should be. And yet, one who works chiseling wheels knows just how hard he has to hit – he “gets it in his hand and feels it in his mind” – even if there is no way to express this knowledge discursively. Zhuangzi thus shows very clearly that it is possible that one has legitimate knowledge, yet have it be knowledge that cannot be expressed discursively.

Of course, even if in Zhuangzi’s case, this recognition of the existence of knowledge as know-how is coupled with a suspicion about the possibility and relevance of discursive knowledge (“what you are reading there must be nothing but the chaff and dregs of the man of old”), not all instances of ancient philosophy are so skeptical about the role discursive knowledge can have in leading us to a sort of knowledge that is not itself discursive, but rather a know-how. Yet, according to Hadot, all of them are in agreement that the ultimate sort of knowledge that philosophy strives for is not discursive, but practical: this knowledge that one has to experience and feel in one’s self and which enables one to do something, independently of the extent to which he expresses this knowledge discursively.

Thus, the *sophia* aimed at by the philosopher is not a discursive way of talking about things, but rather a certain way of doing something. But what, exactly? The end of Hadot’s passage states it clearly: knowing how to do good – which here amounts to knowing how to live well, undisturbed by external circumstances, and enjoying a state of peace of mind.¹⁰ The aim of the philosopher is, thus, not to be in possession of incredible amounts of theoretical, discursive knowledge about things, but rather to have this sort of intuitive knowledge of how to live in such a way that one enjoys

10) “At first glance, in fact, one might wonder if the conceptions of wisdom were really all that different among the schools. All Hellenistic schools seem to define it in approximately the same terms: first and foremost, as a state of perfect peace of mind... . Whether or not they laid claim to the Socratic heritage, all Hellenistic philosophers agreed with Socrates that human beings are plunged in misery, anguish, and evil because they exist in ignorance. Evil is to be found not within things, but in the value judgments which people bring to bear upon things. People can therefore be cured of their ills only if they are persuaded to change their value judgments, and in this sense all these philosophies wanted to be therapeutic. In order to change our value judgments, however, we must make a radical choice to change our entire way of thinking and way of being. This choice is the choice of philosophy, and it is thanks to it that we may obtain inner tranquility and peace of mind.” (Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 102)

a state of true happiness, (i.e., of a perfect peace of mind). Moreover, it is important to stress: because wisdom is knowing how to live well, wisdom is itself the state of living well, the very state of peace of mind for which philosophers strive. Thus, ultimately wisdom is not a discursive knowledge, not only because it is a certain know-how, but also because it is fundamentally a state of being – a way of being in the world. As Hadot puts it: “throughout antiquity, wisdom was considered a mode of being: a state in which a person is, in a way which is radically different from that of other people – a state in which he is a kind of superman.”¹¹

Striving for Sophia: Philosophy as Spiritual Exercises

Simply knowing what *sophia* is, however, does not suffice for knowing what philosophy as a way of life is. Philosophers, by Plato’s account,¹² are not themselves wise – if they search for *sophia*, that is precisely because they are not in possession of it. And in fact, as Hadot points out,

The figure of the sage thus plays a decisive role in the philosophical choice of life, yet it is offered to the philosopher as an ideal described by philosophical discourse more than as a model incarnate in a living human being. The Stoics said that the sage is extremely rare. There are very few – perhaps one, perhaps none at all. Almost all the other schools were in agreement on this point, except for the Epicureans, who did not hesitate to venerate Epicurus as the sage par excellence. The only universally recognized sage was Socrates – that disconcerting sage who did not know he was a sage.¹³

The philosophical way of life is not the way of life of a sage, but of one who strives to become a sage. It is here, then, that one has to ask: how can one strive for *sophia*? After all, if it is not a discursive knowledge, if it is knowing how to live in such a way

11) Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 220.

12) Ibid., chpt. 4.

13) Ibid., 224.

as to enjoy perfect peace of mind, and thus, if attaining this knowledge is not the same as attaining discursive knowledge, what can one do to attain it, or at least to come closer to it?

It is here that the concept of spiritual exercises becomes crucial, not only to understand Hadot's conception of PWL, but its implications to our understanding of what knowledge is and, more specifically, of what sort of knowledge amounts to authentic, philosophical knowledge.¹⁴ According to Hadot, he has chosen to name the exercises, practiced by ancient philosophers in order to come closer to *sophia*, as spiritual, because no other term could better express the full scope of what these exercises aim to change: namely, the entire *psykhé* of the individual, not only how they reason or think, but how they feel and imagine, and even their physical constitution.¹⁵ Thus, spiritual exercises are aimed at transforming integrally what an individual is, the way they experience the world and themselves, radically changing their spirit by changing the way they look at things and their awareness of them. Indeed, one can say that only by radically changing what they are that the individual can come closer to the objective of attaining wisdom as a state of perfect peace of mind. Which is to be expected since, as said above, wisdom according to the Hadotian PWL understanding of it is first and foremost a state of being, and if wisdom is about being a certain way, then in order to reach it, one has to change what they are and how they live to reach that state.

One might wonder then, whether this conception of philosophy as spiritual exercises does not neglect the role of discourse in philosophical activity – after all, if ancient philosophers conceived of philosophy in terms of spiritual exercises, why would they bother, then, to elaborate sophisticated, abstract philosophical discourses? The answer, to put it shortly, is simply that there is no opposition between spiritual exercises, on the one hand, and philosophical discourse, on the other. Philosophical discourse is indeed one of the fundamental ways of practicing spiritual exercises, for some of the most meaningful ways to bring about a spiritual change in someone, according to ancient philosophy, is by means of the different uses one can make of philosophical discourse. Whether through a dialogue between individuals in which they exercise

14) Ibid., chpt. 9.

15) Hadot, *Exercícios Espirituais*, 20.

the faculties needed to change their way of looking at things, or by meditating on philosophical discourses written by masters of a school so that one can internalize their meaning and thus change their outlook on their everyday lives, philosophical discourse is a core part of philosophy as a way of life, as long as one practices it not as an end in itself, but as a way of changing how they live and who they are in their everyday lives.¹⁶ Philosophical discourse is thus conceived as a spiritual exercise, one of the fundamental tools a philosopher uses to practice spiritual exercises in order to radically change who they are.

Living in the Present and Cosmic Consciousness: The Forms of Spiritual Exercises

But in what ways, exactly, should one change what one is, in order to reach or to at least come closer to that state of being which is wisdom? In other words, what are the kinds of spiritual exercises one has to practice in order to come closer to the state of perfect peace of mind that wisdom itself is? In chapter 9 of *What is Ancient Philosophy*, Hadot distinguishes two fundamental types of spiritual exercises which, while in a way opposite, are fundamentally complementary: the exercises of relation to the self or concentration on the I and the exercises of relation to the cosmos and expansion of the I. According to Hadot, all ancient schools, regardless of their differences in philosophical discourses and the peculiarities of their spiritual exercises, have some version or another of those two fundamental types of spiritual exercises. Thus, in order to understand what spiritual exercises are, and how they connect to the PWL specific conception of knowledge, we have to delve deeper into what those two fundamental types of spiritual exercises are, and what they aim at achieving.

16) “We can consider the relationship between philosophical life and philosophical discourse in three different ways, which are closely linked. First, discourse justifies our choice of life and develops all its implications. We could say that through a kind of reciprocal causality, the choice of life determines discourse, and discourse determines our choice of life, as it justifies it theoretically. Second, in order to live philosophically, we must perform actions on ourselves and on others; and if philosophical discourse is truly the expression of an existential option, then from this perspective it is an indispensable means. Finally, philosophical discourse is one of the very forms of the exercise of the philosophical way of life, as dialogue with others or with oneself.” (Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 175)

First, let us examine more closely the spiritual exercises of relation to the self and concentration on the I. According to Hadot,¹⁷ that sort of exercise is focused on training the individual to focus entirely on what they are currently experiencing, and thus on the present moment. The purpose of such exercises is, then, to make the individual entirely aware of themselves, of what they are, and how they perceive the present moment, and moreover, of what they are currently experiencing. In short, the core purpose of those exercises is to make the individual focus their attention entirely on the present moment. The clearest examples of such exercises we find, precisely, in the philosophical discourse of two contrasting Hellenistic schools: Epicureanism and Stoicism – which is all the more interesting, since it shows that one and the same fundamental exercise can be practiced by means of different, even opposite philosophical discourses. In both schools, we find the exercise of meditating on death through philosophical discourse, and through this meditation, being encouraged to focus entirely on the present moment.

In Epicureanism, one of the ways in which this exercise is done is through the meditation on the Epicurean philosophical discourse on the physical nature of the universe and thus, on death's meaninglessness to us. According to Epicurean physics, the whole universe is composed simply of atoms and void; thus, we ourselves are nothing more than a certain composition of atoms. This means that when this composition ceases, so does our existence entirely, so that death cannot be neither good nor bad for us: it is simply nothing since after death we cease entirely to exist, and do not feel either pleasure or pain. Thus, by meditating on the meaninglessness of death to us, one is to be encouraged to focus their attention entirely on the pleasure one feels in the present moment, in one's current existence and in one's awareness of their own existence, and not drift away in thoughts or in fear of death.¹⁸

In Stoicism, on the other hand, this exercise is done by meditating on a philosophical discourse of an entirely different nature from the Epicurean's: the physical discourse according to which the universe consists of an organic, rational whole in

17) Ibid., 190–202.

18) “The Epicurean meditation on death is intended to make us aware of both the absolute value of existence and the nothingness of death, to give us the love of life and to suppress the fear of death: ‘The exercise of living well and the exercise of dying well are one and the same thing.’ To die well means to understand that death, qua not-being, is nothing for us; but it also means rejoicing at each instant that we have acceded to being, and knowing that death cannot diminish the plenitude of the pleasure of being.” (Ibid., 197s.)

which everything that happens, happens for a reason and could not happen otherwise. According to this discourse, it would be futile to try to control the future, as the events of the world depend on a series of causes that are not in our control and that act necessarily. Thus, in one's action, one has to focus solely on that which is indeed in one's control: the intention with which they act at the present moment. By meditating on the philosophical discourse of the necessity of what happens and of the sole control of our intentions, one is meant to be encouraged to focus their consciousness (and conscience) on the intention with which they act at the present moment, and thus, to focus entirely on the present.¹⁹

We see then that this sort of spiritual exercise aims to provide a certain, specific know-how, to wit, to be able to focus on the present moment. What is more interesting here though is that, as we can see, while philosophical discourse is one of the preferred ways by ancient philosophers to exercise oneself in such ability, it is not necessary to adhere to a single, specific discourse in order to find a way to practice such attention to the moment. Different philosophies will offer different philosophical perspectives drawing upon which one can cultivate such ability. According to Hadot, this is fundamental for understanding and interpreting the philosophical discourse of ancient philosophers, and the provisory character that is often present in them. If one, for instance, does not find a systematical exposition of Plato's philosophical discourse, according to Hadot, this is due to the fact that he is more interested in the exercise provided by the philosophical discourse than in the ultimate validity of the theoretical content it exposes.²⁰ This is why – even in dogmatic schools such as Epicureanism or Stoicism, where one considers that

19) “This exercise of self-awareness can thus be reduced to an exercise of attention to oneself (*prosokhe*) and vigilance. It supposes that, at each instant, we renew our choice of life – that is to say, the purity of our intentions, the conformity of our individual will with the will of universal Nature – and that we keep constantly present in our minds the rules of life which express that choice. Philosophers must be perfectly aware, at each instant, of what they are and of what they are doing.” (Ibid., 193)

20) “Victor Goldschmidt cannot be suspected of wanting to minimize the systematic aspect of Plato's doctrines; yet he proposed the best explanation of the aforementioned facts by saying that the dialogues were written not to ‘inform’ people but to ‘form’ them. Such was the deepest intention of Plato's philosophy. He did not aim to construct a theoretical system of reality, and then ‘inform’ his readers of it by writing a series of dialogues which methodically set forth this system. Instead, his work consisted in ‘forming’ people – that is to say, in transforming individuals by making them experience, through the example of a dialogue which the reader has the illusion of overhearing, the demands of reason, and eventually the norm of the good.” (Ibid., 73)

a philosophical discourse is capable of expressing some sort of definite truth about reality – experiencing truth (i.e., experiencing the states brought about by meditating on such truths and interiorizing them) is more important than expressing it discursively. One can be a Stoic philosopher without ever having read or written a single Stoic treatise.

Moving on to the second fundamental sort of spiritual exercises: the exercises of relation to the cosmos and expansion of the self;²¹ according to Hadot, this sort of exercise aims at making the individual aware of being part of a whole that goes far beyond their individual existence. By practicing this exercise, then, one is meant to become aware of their true self, (i.e., of the reality that is the ground of his existence and that, at the same time, far surmounts their existence as an individual) in such a way that connects them to the whole of reality and gives them the “perspective of the whole.” Such an exercise, then, takes as its aim making one fully aware of their connection to everything that is and to everything that they experience, and to see everything from this global, cosmic perspective. This is why Hadot names the state which is aimed at by those exercises as “cosmic consciousness,” (i.e., consciousness not only of one’s connection with the cosmos, but through this connection, consciousness of everything from the perspective of the cosmos, of the whole).

One of the clearest examples of such exercises come again from Stoic physics: by meditating on the Stoic idea of the *logos*, of the rational principle that governs the whole of reality (and in fact is reality seen from the whole, from what organizes and structures it as a whole), one is meant to realize that everything that happens is ultimately good and should be loved by them. For, even if what happens is not beneficial from the perspective of the individual self, it is always beneficial from the perspective of the whole, for it is determined by this whole and for the sake of this whole. And, if we are part of this whole, if we can only be insofar as this whole is, and if as part of this organic whole the purpose of our existence is to do our part in this whole, then there is nothing that can be truly harmful to us, (i.e., truly harmful to our true selves, to that reality of which we are a part of). Everything is fundamentally good because everything is good from the perspective of the whole and, thus, from the perspective of what we truly are, (i.e., not our individual selves, but

21) Ibid., 202–20.

the whole to which they are connected, and which is the grounding reality of our very individual selves).²²

Now, one could ask how these exercises, and the states they aim to bring about – which we could surmise as concentration on the present moment, on the one hand, and cosmic consciousness, on the other – are connected to the philosophical ideal of wisdom, understood as a state of perfect peace of mind. Why should focusing on the present moment and being aware of our connection to a deeper reality than our individual selves have as a result a state of perfect peace of mind, which is seen as the state of knowing how to live well? Hadot's own explanation would be that on the one hand, by focusing on the present moment we are not disturbed by thoughts on the past or the future: true focus at the present makes it possible to not be disturbed by anything, and thus, to enjoy a state of imperturbability, of *ataraxia* (i.e., of tranquility). On the other hand, regarding cosmic consciousness, our example of the Stoics already shows clearly how such a state could contribute to bringing about peace of mind: by identifying with the whole of reality, I am no longer disturbed by what is seen as harmful from a limited, individual perspective, but rather become indifferent to what happens, for I consider that what I truly am is not affected by the harms that come about to my merely individual, limited self.²³

I would like to argue, however, that there is a deeper reason why such states of concentration on the present moment and cosmic consciousness are connected to wisdom as peace of mind. Wisdom is seen, in this philosophical tradition, as a state of perfection of being: of the plenitude of being, of such a perfect being that thus lacks nothing outside, being perfectly self-sufficient. Now, to reach wisdom as a state of being, as I said, one has to practice spiritual exercises in order to change

22) "The Stoic's fundamental attitude is this continuous attention, which means constant tension and consciousness, as well as vigilance exercised at every moment. Thanks to this attention, the philosopher is always perfectly aware not only of what he is doing, but also of what he is thinking (this is the task of lived logic) and of what he is – in other words, of his place within the cosmos. This is lived physics. Such self-consciousness is, above all, moral consciousness, which seeks at every moment to purify and rectify our intentions. At every instant, it is careful to allow no other motive for action than the will to do good. Yet such self-consciousness is not merely moral; it is also a cosmic and rational consciousness. Attentive people live in the constant presence of the universal Reason which is immanent within the cosmos. They see all things from the perspective of this Reason, and consent joyfully to its will." (Ibid., 138)

23) Ibid., chpt. 9, section title "The Sage."

one's own being so that it comes closer to this perfect state of being that is wisdom. But understood spiritually, what is an individual? One could say that, in this ancient philosophical perspective, an individual is their consciousness, understood broadly as everything of which they are aware – what defines what one spiritually is, is the sort of consciousness one has of things and of themselves.²⁴ Thus, to reach a state of perfection or fullness of being, one has to reach a state of fullness of consciousness, (i.e., of complete awareness, both of one's self and of one's connection with everything that one experiences in their consciousness). For one to fully be, one has to be fully conscious – and this is, precisely, what both fundamental spiritual exercises aim at reaching, and the reason why both, while working in opposite directions, are necessary and complementary to each other: for one can only reach full awareness if one is fully aware both of themselves and of their connection to everything else.

One could maybe still ask why this state of full awareness should translate into the sort of tranquility that is identified with wisdom; the answer, I believe, lies in the fact that, just as full being is self-sufficient and not dependent on anything outside of it, so is full awareness. To be fully aware is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to fully be, in such a way that nothing disturbs this state of complete presence. This should be rendered more intuitive by understanding that if I am fully focused on the present moment and fully aware of what I am experiencing, I am not distracted or disturbed by anything; in not being disturbed, I am thus undisturbed and enjoy imperturbability, tranquility, and peace of mind as such. In other words, by being fully aware, I can fully be in the present moment, being unaffected by anything outside of this present moment and being, therefore, tranquil.

24) Nowhere is this perspective more beautifully explained than in Hadot's work on Plotinus:

"Consciousness is a point of view, a center of perspective. For us, our 'self' coincides with that point from which a perspective is opened up for us, be it onto the world or onto our souls. In other words, in order for a psychic activity to be 'ours,' it must be conscious. Consciousness, then – and along with it our 'self' – is situated, like a median or an intermediate center, between two zones of darkness, stretching above and below it: on the one hand, the silent, unconscious life of our 'self' in God; on the other, the silent and unconscious life of the body. By means of our reason, we can discover the existence of these upper and lower levels. But we will not *be* what we really *are*, until we become aware of those levels. If we become conscious of the life of the Spirit, and perceive the pulsations of this eternal life within us, in the same way we can, by paying close attention, perceive the pulsations of our physical heart, then the life of the Spirit would invade the field of our consciousness. Then this life would truly become 'ourselves,' and would truly be *our* life." (Hadot, *Plotinus*, 29)

Thus, we see how the spiritual exercises described by Hadot can be seen, indeed, as the philosophical tools through which one can change oneself in order to come closer to this ideal state of wisdom, even if one does not ever completely reach it. In fact, as Hadot will often emphasize, in this Greco-Roman tradition, wisdom is most of the time seen as an ideal to which humans can, at best, only come close but never fully reach. And yet, this does not deny the efficacy of the spiritual exercises: for, even though one might not be able to sustain this state of full awareness, by practicing constantly these exercises, one can reach greater degrees of awareness, and eventually even moments of true, full awareness, even if one is not able to sustain this state indefinitely, such as a true “sage” would be capable of doing.

Whatever the case, one thing is clear: just as wisdom is here conceived not as some sort of theoretical content or discursive knowledge, but rather a knowledge that is inseparable from being, a knowledge that is itself a way of being, so the true philosophical knowledge philosophers developed within their own philosophies, and meant to contribute to coming closer to wisdom, is not discursive knowledge. Rather, it is knowledge that is inseparable from a certain way of being, that is nothing else than a certain way of being, namely, the way of being one practices through spiritual exercises of attention to the present and of cosmic consciousness and which brings one closer to the ideal state of being, to wisdom.

To Know Is to Be: Further Consideration on the PWL Conception of Knowledge

In my exposition of the spiritual exercises, I hope to have made one thing clear: the sort of knowledge that philosophy aims to achieve is, in Hadotian PWL terms, first and foremost a way of being: to be wise is not to know theoretical contents one can discursively express, but rather to enjoy a certain state of being that is reached by living a certain way. This is not to mean that philosophical discourse and discursive knowledge is not relevant at all from a PWL perspective; as we have seen, this is far from being the case. Yet, if the ultimate sort of knowledge that philosophy aims at is wisdom (*sophia* as this knowing how to live well which is inseparable of actually living well), then one has to acknowledge that the sort of knowledge that is considered to be the ultimate, most authentic philosophical knowledge is not discursive knowledge.

Yet, one could object: “why should one still call this sort of knowledge ‘knowledge’ at all, if we are talking here not about a conceptual, discursive way of grasping things, but rather about a way of being?” Does it suffice to be a certain way to say that one knows something about what it is to be that way? Should merely the fact that one enjoys a state of tranquility imply that this one has some sort of knowledge about how to be tranquil?

Those are all very valid questions. In order to fully address them, one has to have in mind three points. The first is whether or not one can ultimately hold this identification of being and knowledge, it seems to be the case that ancient philosophers did draw this identification, whether we think it is sustainable or not. Following Hadot’s quotation on the term *sophia*, one could say that for ancient philosophers, at least according to Hadot, that knowledge was not something to be opposed to and distinguished from being *tout court*. Rather, while they recognized that not all knowledge of something amounts to being that very something, the ultimate sort of knowledge is the one in which to know is to be the very thing which is known. In fact, wisdom itself is not conceived as a sort of knowledge of what truly is and that is separate from true being: rather, wisdom is itself a state of perfection of being, and to be wise is just to enjoy this state of perfection, to be identical with it. It is no wonder then that, just as Hadot points out, the ideal of the wise in ancient philosophical schools is often identified or closely connected to the idea of the divine itself, such that “the theology of the Greek philosophers is, one might say, a theology of the sage.”²⁵ Thus, even if we are reticent about whether this way of conceiving knowledge is ultimately sustainable, one must acknowledge that ancient philosophers did think that states of being can not only be properly called, on their own, a sort of knowledge, but as the most elevated sort of knowledge one can have about anything: the most profound knowledge one can attain from something is the knowledge one attains from becoming the very thing he wants to know.

The second point is that there is actually a lot that speaks in favor of this sort of knowledge being recognized as, indeed, a form of knowledge, no less valuable than discursive knowledge and, in many respects, perhaps even more valuable. In order to understand why one should call this conception of *sophia* a sort of knowledge, we

25) Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 228.

have to return to the idea of a know-how. To know how to do something, as we established remembering Zhuangzi's quote, is not necessarily to know how to speak about that which you know. Yet, no one would be willing to say that, for example, a good soccer player does not know how to play soccer, just because he does not know how to speak about what it is that makes him a good soccer player.

In fact, at first we would not have any difficulty in acknowledging that there is the sort of knowledge that is a know-how, a *technê*. What might seem counterintuitive here, however, is to identify the sort of knowledge that we call know-how with this knowledge we are claiming here to be the authentic, philosophical knowledge for ancient philosophers, in which to know is inseparable from being what you know. In order to understand this identification, however, one should raise the question: if this knowledge, this know-how of the football player, is not to be found in his discourse, where is it to be found? The answer we believe is simply put: it is to be found in what he is (i.e., in the sorts of abilities that are embedded in what he does and in who he is), or in other words, in his being. This sort of knowledge, while it can no doubt be aided by discursive knowledge, does not require it to be attained; at least to some extent – some people are “naturally” talented in football. And even if, in order to improve, they have to be aided by discursive knowledge (such as the instructions of a coach) – yet the knowledge they attain with such aid that makes them better football players is not itself discursive – to become a better football player by means of instruction is not the same as being in possession of a well-articulated discourse on being a good player, nor is that required for such improvement. There is thus, a very reasonable sense in which to know something, and more specifically to know-how to do something, is inseparable of being something: to truly know how to play football well, or in other words to know how to be a good football player, is indeed to be a good football player.

What might remain strange here, however, is not the idea that there is a sort of knowledge that is distinct from discursive knowledge and that is characterized as a know-how, but to think that philosophy is more interested in this kind of knowledge, rather than in discursive knowledge. And yet, based on Hadot's account, this seems to be the case: only that the philosopher is not in search of specific know-hows, such as how to be a good football or basketball player; the philosopher is in search of knowing how “to do good,” (i.e., to simply be in the most perfect way, to exist in the

most plentiful way as possible). And just as to know how to play football well is to be a good football player, to know how to be in the most plentiful way is just to be the most plentiful, for knowing how to live is, unlike football or basketball, a knowledge: a know-how that one practices at every moment of one's life and that is tested at each instant of one's life. Just as knowing how to play football is to be a good football player, one cannot know what is wisdom as the perfection of being without experiencing this perfection in what one is in and of themselves, in their own being.

The third point is that it is precisely the strangeness of this concept of knowledge that makes it relevant for us today, for it is this strangeness that allows us to question our presuppositions not only about what knowledge is, but of what kind of knowledge we should focus on obtaining. For, if one thinks that the sort of knowledge that is most valuable is the one that, to be obtained, requires from us some sort of self-transformation, some sort of change of who we are and how we live, this has, no doubt, deep ethical consequences that could imply the necessity of rethinking the organization, structure, and purpose of our society and of our educational institutions in order to make the attainment of such knowledge possible. Moreover, if one thinks that there is a specific sort of transformation that this knowledge is supposed to bring about, such as the states of attention to the present moment and cosmic consciousness, alongside the peace of mind that results from them, one radically rethinks what should be the main purpose of the knowledge we produce and aim to acquire today.

This is also, I believe, the point in which our understanding of Hadotian PWL has brought the most significant contribution for contemporary academic debate on PWL, in such a way that also contributes to grasping its relevance today. For, while the conceptions of PWL (from contemporary specialists such as John Sellars,²⁶ Michael Chase,²⁷ Caleb M. Cohoe and Stephen R. Grimm,²⁸ and Luís de Miranda²⁹), all point toward the fact that PWL requires us to conceive of philosophy in practical, existential terms, none of them emphasize, as our perspective does, that PWL also requires rethinking our very understanding of what knowledge and truth is. Even de Miranda

26) Sellars, *Filosofia como modo de vida*?

27) Chase, *Observações sobre modo de vida*.

28) Cohoe and Grimm, *What It Takes to Live Philosophically*.

29) de Miranda, "Five Principles of Philosophical Health."

– who in some respects, has a very similar approach to ours, by emphasizing how philosophical activity implies the sort of experience of truth that Hadot describes in terms of cosmic consciousness³⁰ – does not go in depth in the discussion of to what extent philosophical knowledge of the Truth implies: that the very notion of what it means to know the truth has to be rethought of in terms of a “know-how” that is inseparable from one’s being, rather than in terms of propositional knowledge about the truth. According to my reading then, Hadotian PWL implies a conception of philosophy according to which to look for wisdom and for philosophical knowledge is to look for the know-how that brings about the states of attention to the present, cosmic consciousness, and the peace of mind resulting therefrom.³¹ This know-how, moreover, which is inseparable from being a certain way, is just what ultimate philosophical knowledge, what knowledge of the truth is (i.e., to know the truth is to experience truth in one’s own being in the form of this state of being characterized by attention to the present, cosmic consciousness and peace of mind, i.e., the state of wisdom). And in my perspective, it is the emphasis on this specific conception of wisdom that is one of the most relevant elements that PWL can contribute to contemporary issues today. To conclude then, I will point out how this PWL conception of knowledge is closely tied to some of the most relevant contemporary debates today regarding the current crisis we are facing as a society led by capitalist imperatives of productivity, by discussing the relation of this conception with the philosophies of two contemporary authors: Byung-Chul Han and Ailton Krenak.

Life Beyond Capitalism: The Relevance of the PWL Conception of Knowledge Today

In his books, Byung-Chul Han criticizes our contemporary society, described as a burnout society and a performance society, due to the fact that within it, freedom

30) Ibid., 72.

31) “Wisdom is the state which the philosopher may never reach, but towards which he is inclined, striving to change himself in order to overcome himself. This is a mode of existence characterized by three essential aspects: peace of mind (*ataraxia*), inner freedom (*autarkeia*) and (except for the sceptics) cosmic consciousness, that is, becoming aware of belonging to the human and cosmic whole, a sort of dilation, of transfiguration of the I that realizes the grandness of the soul (*megalopsuchia*).” (Hadot, *Exercícios Espirituais*, 278).

and exploitation coincide. For in our society, due to the work of psychopolitics, one is led to believe that the only way one can be free and fulfilled is by affirming their individuality, which is achieved by being productive and standing out as an individual through one's productivity. The consequence of this mindset, however, is that the individual feels like he is never doing enough, and that he has to produce more and more in order to truly stand out as an individual and affirm their own freedom and will. This ultimately leads the individual to an internal collapse, which manifests itself most frequently in the form of pathologies such as burnout and depression. The consequence of this way of living is that, rather than truly being free through this excess of positivity and self-affirmation, the individual exploits himself voluntarily, without need of any external control or imposition.³²

What is important to stress here is that, according to Han, what leads the individual to this self-destructive state is precisely the focus on his individuality, the fact that the whole of their existence is centered around confirming and reaffirming their power and their centrality as an individual. In this mode of existence, according to Han, one is deprived of the relation to the other, (i.e., to that dimension of existence which connects someone to something other than themselves and that leads them to experience things beyond the perspective of their individual self and individual interests).³³

It is no coincidence then that although Han apparently never read Hadot, for he never quotes him directly, when he attempts to indicate what would be an alternative way of life to the one we are leading today, the manner in which he describes this other way of life comes shockingly close to Hadot's description of ancient philosophy as a way of life. Many examples could be given across Han's different works of how this alternative way of life contains what could be called spiritual exercises both of attention to the present as well as of cosmic consciousness, but perhaps the most significant expression of this confluence is to be found in one of Han's most recent books, which is called, significantly, *Vita Contemplativa or on Inactivity*.³⁴ For, in Han's description of contemplation as what is most essentially human is contained, on the one hand, the idea that in order to be truly happy and fulfilled, one has to focus

32) Han, *Psicopolítica*.

33) Ibid.

34) Han, *Vita Contemplativa*.

entirely on what one is experiencing, letting go of the intention to do anything with what one experiences other than be completely aware of it.³⁵ On the other hand, Han's conception of contemplation is also connected to the idea that to be truly free, one has to go beyond one's individual interests and perspective and simply be aware of that which is beyond oneself and connects them to the whole, to *nature* and to the world as that which makes our very existence possible.³⁶ So we read in *Vita Contemplativa* the following remarks from Han on Novalis:

According to Novalis, nothing in the world exists isolated. All things flow and slide into one another. Everything is entangled with everything. Novalis turns poetry into a medium of reunion, reconciliation, and love. Poetry freed an intensity that pulls things away from their isolation and brings them together in a beautiful community... . In the peaceful kingdom to come, human and nature reconcile. The humans are nothing but *fellow citizens* in a *republic of live beings*, to which also plants, animals, stones, clouds, and stars belong.³⁷

Only thus, when one understands that true happiness and freedom comes not from the pursuit of individual self-affirmation, but of full awareness and connection to the whole of nature and all beings, can one truly live a form of life that escapes the paradoxical self-exploitation of our contemporary burnout and performance society, and in doing so truly experience freedom, which according to Han, is nothing more than a "well-succeeded community."³⁸

Han's apology of the contemplative life, again not entirely coincidentally even if there is no direct dialogue between those two authors, has many affinities with the way Ailton Krenak, a Brazilian indigenous philosopher, understands life in his *A vida*

35) Ibid., 153–54.

36) Contemplation, indeed, might be the most appropriate name for the PWL specific sort of knowledge we presented here. For, in ancient philosophy, to contemplate is not to watch from a distant perspective something, but to be in direct contact with that which is contemplated, to become one with what is contemplated, and thus, is the fundamental form of cosmic consciousness.

37) Han, *Vita Contemplativa*, 167.

38) Han, *Psicopolítica*, 12.

não é útil. One of the main problems we face today in our modern societies, according to Krenak, is that we attempt to turn life into something useful, something productive. In doing so, however, we slave ourselves, and do not comprehend that life does not have to be and should not be useful, for life is not about being productive and thus always living in the future, looking for what one will accomplish next. Rather, life is about enjoying the present moment, which can only be done if we allow ourselves to experience our connection with other beings, with nature: feeling that our very lives are part of a greater life that connects us all and that is meant to be fully lived, rather than exploited for the sake of profit. Again, Krenak apparently never read Hadot, and one could wonder if he himself would consider what he does philosophy; yet again, it is remarkable how in many aspects the way he describes the Krenak people's way of life in particular, and how it is connected to other indigenous ways of life, closely resembles the way Hadot describes PWL – with the emphasis both to attention on the present and cosmic consciousness, such as in the following passage of *A Vida Não é Útil*:

Other beings are with us, and the re-creation of the world is a possible event all the time.

The experience of being in this flow clearly gives us the feeling that the pandemic is not the biggest disaster on the planet. If we get stuck in a stale, commodified worldview of control and domination, of course we're going to be scared to death, but try getting out of that car, try having a cosmic relationship with the world. Many people think that only shamans, or people who have achieved some form of transcendence, can have this experience, but what they call science is there all the time confirming the relationship between the Earth and the solar system, between galaxies. Let's summon up the experience of being in harmony with the cosmos: it's possible to experience this in our daily lives without surrendering to all the terrorism of modernity.

Thus, we can see the sort of knowledge aimed at by PWL – wisdom that is gained by attention to the present and by cultivating cosmic consciousness – is not some sort of relic of a past culture, which holds no interest for us today. More than ever, it seems, it is this sort of knowledge that is looked for and indicated as not only a necessary

remedy to our world's current ills, but as the most valuable sort of knowledge, as the one that can truly bring us happiness and fulfillment, and not the mere promise of such fulfillment through mechanisms of self-affirmation and productivity that only make us further unsatisfied.

Final Remarks

In my paper, I attempted to show that PWL from a Hadotian perspective points to another way of understanding what true, philosophical knowledge is, and thus, what sort of knowledge we should strive for before any other in our lives. One of the most important contributions of such a discussion to our contemporary debate on the directions we are taking as a society today is, I believe, to point out that in order to resist the submission of our entire lives to the demands of productivity and utility, it is crucial to revise our very understanding of what knowledge is and thus, of what knowledge of reality and ourselves is worth pursuing and should be pursued by society as a whole. Seeing philosophy and knowledge from a PWL perspective allows us to recognize the authentic, philosophical value of a sort of knowledge that is not primarily or mainly discursive or theoretical, and yet, remains a legitimate way of knowing, and more than that, of knowing how to live and how to be in our world: a knowledge that, in face of our current environmental, social, and political crisis, not only remains relevant to us today, but is most likely more important than ever.

Acknowledgement

This work was funded by the FCT (Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P.), under the Exploratory Project “Mapping Philosophy as a Way of Life: An Ancient Model, A Contemporary Approach” (Project number: 2022.02833.PTDC).

A special thanks to Marta Faustion, Eli Kramer and Helder Télo, for their interest on my PWL research and for the opportunity of participating in the project “Mapping Philosophy as a Way of Life: An Ancient Model, a Contemporary Approach”.

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