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Philosophical Dogmas or Questions? A Defense of Philosophical Questioning as a Way of Life

Abstract:

This article compares two different ways of construing philosophy as a way of life (PWL), examining how they influence our understanding of the philosophical tradition and of philosophy today. First, I demonstrate that scholars (including Hadot himself at many points) tend to view PWL as involving a set of philosophical “dogmas” (i.e., doctrines, arguments, or discourse) that are to be implemented in our lives through special practices or spiritual exercises. Next, I argue that PWL should instead be construed as primarily related to questions, particularly philosophical ones. According to this view, the philosophical discourse that transforms one’s life is primarily interrogative, and philosophical questioning itself can be a form of spiritual exercise, capable of altering our way of being and living. Finally, I briefly explore what a history of PWL based on this model might look like.

Keywords:

philosophy as a way of life, Hadot, philosophical doctrines, wisdom, spiritual exercises, philosophical inquiry, history of philosophy

Not the truth which someone possesses or believes he possesses, but the honest effort he has made to get at the truth, constitutes a human being's worth. For it is not through the possession of truth, but through its pursuit, that his powers are enlarged, and it is in this alone that his ever-growing perfection lies. Possession makes us inactive, lazy, and proud.

Lessing, "A rejoinder"¹

1. Introduction²

The notion of philosophy as a way of life (PWL) has had a significant impact on our understanding of the history of philosophy (not only in ancient philosophy, to which the notion was first applied, but also in Western and even non-Western traditions) and in how many people conceive of and practice it today. Despite its growing use, there are still important divergences regarding its precise meaning and scope (as will be shown in section 2). This article addresses a point of divergence that has received little consideration but has many implications for how we understand the history of the PWL tradition and its reactivation today. My objective is to distinguish between two extreme tendencies (even though it is possible to find combinations or mixed forms) and challenge the one that scholars often seem to adopt (even if implicitly). The PWL model that corresponds to this general tendency is represented in the article's title by the notion of "philosophical dogmas" and could be referred to as the sapiential model of PWL or "wisdom as a way of life."³ In this context, the terms "dogmas" and "wisdom" refer to philosophical doctrines, views, or arguments about the nature

1) Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 98.

2) I am grateful to Matthew Sharpe, Marta Faustino, John Sellars, Leonard Waks, Eli Kramer, Matteo Stettler, Pawel Odyneć, and an anonymous reviewer for their valuable questions and suggestions on earlier versions of this article.

3) Pierre Hadot himself suggests this expression when he says that wisdom "was a way of life" in the Hellenistic and Roman eras (Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 265; hereafter PW with parenthetical citations where relevant).

of things and how we should live. These dogmas establish a worldview and claim to represent a form of wisdom.⁴ To practice PWL or live philosophically, it is not enough to engage in spiritual exercises or mental training; one must also adopt a philosophical way of seeing things, consider it correct or settled (as a dogma in the usual sense of the word), live according to it, and possibly impart it to others.⁵ As we will see, this perspective is hinted at by Hadot in certain passages (although other passages are opposed to it) and is widely prevalent among PWL scholars when studying the history of PWL and discussing its contemporary revival.

It is difficult not to be at least partly tempted by such a model, especially if we consider the history of philosophy, where we find many claims to wisdom (indeed, the term “philosophy” is often used to denote a type of knowledge). However, we can conceive of a different model – one that is also partially suggested by Hadot, but much less explored in PWL literature (despite some exceptions we will consider). This other model understands questions or philosophical questions as the essential part (or at least one of the essential parts) of philosophy and we could call it the erotetic (or interrogative, questioning, inquisitive) model. However, what matters most here is not the interrogative mood of philosophical discourse in general, but the idea that one recognizes or feels that knowledge is lacking and one strives to attain it, being thus forced to inquire. Philosophy is here primarily desire or quest for wisdom and, as such, clearly distinct from the possession of wisdom. This can also be expressed by notions such as “the desire for wisdom as a way of life,” “philosophy as an interrogative (or questioning, inquisitive) way of life” or “philosophical questioning as a way of life.”

4) I use the term “wisdom” as encompassing a cognitive dimension in its core, even if it cannot be reduced to this aspect alone, as Hadot and others have pointed out. See for example Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 44, 224–33, and Sharpe, “A Good Person for a Crisis?”

5) By using “dogma” or “dogmatic” throughout this article I intend to stress precisely how a particular way of seeing things is regarded as correct or settled. I have in mind the use of “dogmatic” since Antiquity – particularly in ancient Pyrrhonism – to designate those who think that they have attained the truth (see e.g., Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, i, 3). It is also relevant that these words suggest cognitive hastiness (insofar as one accepts certain views without thorough examination), as well as some similarity between a particular way of understanding philosophy or PWL and religion as a matter of belief (though elaborating on those points exceeds this article’s scope). Please note that I do not, however, wish to convey that the way of relating to dogmas or the dogmatic attitude in question is as such obstinate, strongly resistant to changing one’s mind, or irrational in the sense of refusing to present or consider any arguments.

In what follows, I will try to explain and argue for this model or this way of understanding PWL, both as an ideal for philosophy today and as a description of how PWL has been understood throughout the history of philosophy (particularly western philosophy, on which I will focus). I will start by showing the tendency in PWL literature to focus on dogmas and to neglect questions (section 2). Then, as a way of preparing an alternative PWL model, I will develop a brief phenomenology of questions and especially philosophical questions (section 3). In section 4, I will consider how philosophical questions can constitute a type of spiritual exercise and give rise to a way of life marked by questions. Finally, I will provide a very brief overview of the consequences of the erotetic model of PWL for our understanding of the history of philosophy.

2. Dogmas and Questions in Hadot and Other PWL Scholars

Let us then start by considering how different scholars characterize PWL and what they say about questions. Hadot, who first introduced the notion, is mostly interested in arguing that ancient philosophers conceived of their practice as irreducible to what seems to correspond to the dogmatic or doctrinal element: philosophical theories or discourse. As he says, “philosophy was a way of life,” which means not only that “it was a specific type of moral conduct,” but also that “philosophy was a mode of existing-in-the-world, which had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual’s life” (PW, 265). This is also expressed in his view that philosophy was a spiritual exercise, insofar as it involved a transformation of our whole way of seeing, being, and living. In addition, Hadot argues that, for ancient philosophers, philosophy began with an existential option that preceded and originated philosophical discourse.⁶ The dogmatic or doctrinal element seems, therefore, to be secondary, even though it still plays an important role, insofar as this existential option “implies a certain vision of the world” and philosophical life always requires theoretical philosophical discourse, which “incites both masters and disciples to live in genuine conformity with their initial choice” and is described as being, “in a way, the application of a certain ideal of life.”⁷ Hence, according to these character-

6) Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 3.

7) Ibid.

izations of ancient philosophy (and, by extension, of PWL, at least in antiquity), the practical dimension of philosophy seems to be inextricably connected to what could be broadly called a dogmatic element. As Hadot says about Epicurus, “philosophical theories are in the service of the philosophical life,” but they are nevertheless a central element of philosophical life (PW, 267).

It is important to remark that the importance of this doctrinal or dogmatic element is counterbalanced by Hadot’s emphasis on the idea that philosophy (or, more precisely, ancient philosophy) is characterized by the distance from wisdom.⁸ Hadot presents this as a constitutive feature of ancient philosophy (he says that the “philosopher will never attain wisdom”), defines wisdom as a transcendent norm, and characterizes philosophical life as “a never-ending quest” (see PW, 280).⁹ He even goes as far as saying that “philosophy’s tonality is also tragic, because the bizarre being called the ‘philosopher’ is tortured and torn by the desire to attain this wisdom which escapes him, yet which he loves.”¹⁰ This is not far from Hadot’s characterization of the experience that shaped his understanding of philosophy: “an anxiety that was both terrifying and delicious, provoked by the sentiment of the presence of the world, or of the Whole, and of me in that world,” which he equates to the questions “*What am I? Why am I here? What is this world I am in?*” and calls “a sentiment of strangeness, of astonishment, and of wonder at being there.”¹¹ It therefore seems that Hadot’s conception of PWL also has an intrinsically interrogative dimension.

However, this interrogative dimension does not prevail in many passages and Hadot often seems to go against the idea that ancient philosophy is essentially characterized by the distance from wisdom. He says that the Stoics conceived of wisdom as “a kind of transcendent state which could be attained only by a sudden, unexpected mutation”;¹² he describes Socrates as a “universally recognized sage”;¹³ he claims that the discourse of some philosophers (such as Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus) comes to

8) Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 4.

9) See *ibid.* 46, 220.

10) *Ibid.*, 47.

11) Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, 5.

12) Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 49.

13) *Ibid.* 224.

the threshold of certain experiences that are either wisdom or a foretaste of it;¹⁴ and he claims that the “the ancients knew that they would never be able to realize wisdom within themselves as a stable, definitive state, but they at least hoped to accede to it in certain privileged moments” (PW, 265) and it demanded “perpetual reconquest.”¹⁵ Moreover, Hadot seems to expressly admit the possibility of someone raising himself “to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom” (PW, 82–83). In fact, even in the characterization of the experience that led him to philosophy, Hadot ends up stressing the change of perspective and assuming a particular perspective (the perspective of the whole) as the central element of his experience. Hence, there seems to be a certain dogmatic proclivity (or at least some dogmatic suggestions) in Hadot’s descriptions of ancient philosophers and of the type of understanding of philosophy he is discussing – PWL.¹⁶

It is also important to note that in general, questions play no central role in his characterization of PWL, even though he makes many important references to them. He speaks about how Socrates “harassed his interlocutors with questions which put themselves into question, forcing them to pay attention to and take care of themselves,” or how he, “the eternal interrogator, used skillful questions to bring his interlocutors to admit their ignorance” (PW, 89, 149); regarding the 7th Letter, he says one “spends a long time in the company of these questions; one ‘lives with them’ until the light blazes forth” (PW, 92); in the case of Aristotle (quoting Düring), investigations are the answer to a question posed in a certain way (PW, 105–106); Plotinus’ *logoi* are “responses to precise questions” (PW, 106); Epictetus’s discourses are also inspired by precise circumstances, including “questions directed to the master” (PW, 106). Indeed, Hadot points out how questions shaped many texts. In many cases, he is referring to the type of exercise called *diatribê* (of which he cites Cicero, Plutarch, Seneca, and Plotinus as examples), in which theoretical positions were “presented in the form of questions” and one was supposed to go “back to general principles that have been accepted in the school and are capable of resolving the problem in question” (PW, 63). Moreover, he talks of a “centrality of

14) Ibid., 4.

15) Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 36.

16) This proclivity becomes even clearer if we assume, together with Matthew Sharpe, that one of Hadot’s main goals was to develop a phenomenology of *sagesse* or wisdom. See Sharpe, “Towards a Phenomenology of *Sagesse*.”

the ‘question-answer’ schema” and the possibility of an inventory of questions or even a history of philosophy as a history of problems (which could extend beyond Antiquity).¹⁷ However, most of these uses of questions are methodological or instrumental, and Hadot tends not to explore the spiritual dimension of questions (or to leave it more in the background), even though there are also some exceptions. For instance, he asserts (without providing much detail) that ancient philosophical discourse did not necessarily propose dogmas or a system, but instead sometimes took the form of “questions, investigations, and *aporiai*,” and as a result, it had the potential to transform one’s way of being.¹⁸ Moreover, some of the spiritual exercises he lists are associated with questions, either implicitly (for instance, an examination of conscience can be construed as a type of questioning) or expressly, as when he describes attention (*prosochê*) as what “allows us to respond immediately to events, as if they were questions asked of us all of a sudden,” even though he immediately relates this to the application of fundamental principles (PW, 85). More generally, he claims that authentic texts and true education involve questions, though they also involve answers or a certain truth (PW, 63, 73).

Hadot’s position regarding PWL and its more dogmatic or more interrogative nature is thus ambiguous (which might actually reflect some ambiguity in ancient sources themselves). Although we cannot reduce Hadot’s view to the dogmatic or sapiential model, we can also see clear suggestions of it (even if unintended) or some inclination toward it. In other PWL scholars, however, this tendency to a dogmatic or sapiential understanding of PWL is clearly stronger. We see this very clearly in scholars who opposed Hadot’s particular understanding of PWL. For instance, John Cooper placed a much greater emphasis on philosophical arguments, doctrines, knowledge, and wisdom. He claims that “ancient philosophers made philosophy the, and the only authoritative, foundation and guide for the whole of human life.”¹⁹ For them, one had to perfect one’s reason and this granted a “completely grounded philosophical understanding of the full truth about how to live.”²⁰ This understanding seems to be implemented in an automatic way, given the “seamless connection between philosophical

17) Hadot, *Selected Writings*, 12, 154.

18) Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 177.

19) Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*, 6.

20) Ibid.

views and action,”²¹ and there is no need for what Hadot called spiritual exercises: there is only a type of philosophical training that allows one to “understand the real meaning and implications of philosophical arguments and philosophical positions, to fix them in one’s mind and make oneself ready to apply them smoothly to situations of life as they may arise.”²² Cooper seems, therefore, to clearly subscribe to the sapiential model: one attains a sort of wisdom and lives according to it. He does not mention any special role questions might play, either in the introduction or in most of the following chapters. There are only some references to questions in the chapter about Socrates, who according to Cooper does not possess wisdom in a proper sense, but nevertheless possesses knowledge.²³

Although differing from Cooper and being closer to Hadot in the main respects, John Sellars follows a similar tendency. In his book on the Stoic art of living, he presents what he calls the technical conception of philosophy – according to which philosophical education has as its first part “the study of philosophical arguments, theories, and doctrines” and then “a period of practical training (*askêsis*) in which the apprentice will attempt to digest this material in order to produce the actions or product (*erga*) appropriate to their art.”²⁴ Later, he adopts the concept of PWL and defines it in the following terms:

I take it to involve the following things: first, that the ultimate motivation of philosophy is to transform one’s way of life; second, that there ought to be some connection and consistency between someone’s stated philosophical ideas and their behaviour; and third that actions are ultimately more philosophically significant than words It resonates with what Isaiah Berlin called “the power of ideas,” that is, the ability of philosophy to transform the life of an individual, or even an entire society. As he put it, the concepts and categories with which people think “must deeply affect their lives.”²⁵

21) Ibid., 15.

22) Ibid., 402.

23) On the distinction between wisdom and knowledge, see *ibid.*, 46–48.

24) Sellars, *Art of Living*, 170.

25) Sellars, “What Is Philosophy as a Way of Life?” 41.

PWL thus refers to stated philosophical ideas, concepts or categories, and they must express themselves in one's behavior or life. There is no mention of questions.

Questions are similarly absent from characterizations of PWL that claim to follow Hadot's ideas more closely. In the introduction to their book on the history of PWL, Matthew Sharpe and Michael Ure present a very elaborate systematization of the features that tend to characterize particular instances of PWL, which they group into three levels: at the pedagogical-practical level, they list pedagogy or training, intellectual exercises, and spiritual exercises; at the level of philosophical discourse, they include the systematic divisions of parts of philosophy, the turn inwards (not *pragmata*, but *dogmata*), literary genres, and metaphilosophical metaphors; finally, at the normative level, they mention models of *sophia* and happiness, the critique of non-philosophical life and the figure of the sage.²⁶ We see that several of these features (especially at the third level) are directly related to the sapiential model, whereas questions are conspicuously omitted and play almost no role in the history presented in the book.

Another example of this tendency toward a sapiential understanding of PWL is an article by Caleb Cohoe and Stephen Grimm where they claim that a "philosophical way of life includes views about humanity and our place in the cosmos" – in short, a worldview.²⁷ Then, they present three conditions for a philosophical way of life: 1) "practitioners of a philosophical way of life are committed to a truth-claim-making, value-prescribing worldview"; 2) "practitioners of a philosophical way of life have their practices and life structured by the worldview to which they are committed"; 3) "the practices and life of practitioners of a philosophical way of life are constitutively truth directed and are responsive to reasons."²⁸

We see that there are several cases where dogmas or doctrines play the central role in the characterization of PWL and questions are not mentioned at all or seem to have little relevance. However, there are also some exceptions to this. One of them is Michael Chase. In an essay where he contrasts PWL with his experience of analytic and continental (poststructuralist or postmodern) philosophy, Chase mentions Hadot's "need to search for answers to a few centrally important questions that had direct

26) Sharpe and Ure, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 13–20.

27) Cohoe and Grimm, "What It Takes to Live Philosophically," 239.

28) *Ibid.*, 240, 243.

impact on his life” and adds that “the need to address these questions is a perennial characteristic of human beings.”²⁹ Even though he still refers to answers, he relativizes their importance by stating that PWL “does not, of course, propose a readymade list of answers in dogmatic fashion, but it gives people access to a wide variety of solutions that ancient philosophers have proposed, as models and guides for further reflection.”³⁰ However, immediately after saying this, he points toward something that seems closer to the sapiential model by presenting future work in the field of PWL as a matter of studying the “transition from theory to practice: precisely how can we integrate a set of philosophical beliefs into our day-to-day behavior, in order to make them a natural, organic part of our lives?”³¹

Another example of PWL scholars recognizing the importance of questions is given by Grimm and Cohoe themselves in another article where they discuss “what it might mean for philosophy to guide one’s life.” After arguing for the limited discerning and motivational power of reason and the need for spiritual exercises, they introduce a very relevant relation to questions in the characterization of PWL:

We suggest that to think philosophically and by extension to live philosophically is always to be alive to the question: “But is it true?” That is, it is to be alive to, and responsive to, the considerations for and against one’s beliefs and the defeaters for one’s beliefs that might come one’s way... A philosopher is therefore someone who typically becomes comfortable living in two worlds: in the world of his or her beliefs and commitments, and also in a world a step outside or above his or her beliefs and commitments... We say “typically,” because this partial detachment might become the full-blown detachment of the skeptic, who leaves his or her first-order commitments entirely behind. Arguably, however, to be a philosopher is to be able to entertain questions about the fallibility of one’s views in a way that temporarily suspends one’s commitments to them.³²

29) Chase, “Observations,” 268, 279.

30) Ibid., 280.

31) Ibid., 281.

32) Grimm and Cohoe, “What Is Philosophy as a Way of Life?,” 247–48.

Grimm and Cohoe are thus trying to make questioning and commitments compatible. However, in doing so they reject radical skeptic questioning. It is therefore unclear how radical these questions are (whether they are an epistemic scruple or an intense need to find the truth) and whether one's philosophical life can be primarily characterized by questions and inquiry or if one is just open to them at any time. This is precisely what I will explore in the following sections.

3. A Brief Phenomenology of (Philosophical) Questioning

To present a model of PWL that places questions at the core of philosophy as a way of life, I will begin by providing a concise characterization of questions in general and philosophical questions in particular.

Questions in general arise within a specific context. Objects, other individuals, and our own selves appear to us in particular ways, and even if they change throughout our experience, we typically do not regard any of it as problematic. We hold numerous views or beliefs about beings around us, and these views or beliefs determine what these beings are and how we interact with them. Generally, we are confident in these views or beliefs and do not even think about them. However, when we think about them, encounter problems, or face questioning, we may start to have doubts about what things (or we ourselves) truly are. Usually, our doubts will be limited to a particular being or a specific aspect of beings, but we may acknowledge the possibility of serious gaps, errors, or misunderstandings in how we see them. We might even come to regard them as a complete mystery. In any case, when we accept the possibility of something being different from what we think, we are immediately brought into relation with something new (even if in the end we merely confirm what we already thought we knew). We do not know what this is yet, but we are already related to it in the mode of what Immanuel Kant called a “negative expansion.”³³ This is precisely what a question is: an opening or an expansion of perspective that leads us to something that already manifests itself to some degree, but still withholds itself from us and is yet to be determined. It announces something that transcends us and allows a sort of *praesentia in absentia*. Moreover, when we experience a question, we are not simply brought into

33) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 256 / B 312.

relation with something else. Indeed, a question and the indetermination associated with it can mobilize us and produce a more or less intense desire for knowledge. We might deeply want to dispel our doubts and know how things truly are. In that case, we will need to inquire or examine things, as this is all we can do to overcome our cognitive limitations and once again become confident in how we see things.

All questions seem, therefore, to involve some level of doubt, openness, and tension. However, questions can differ in several important ways: they can focus on different beings or different aspects of beings; they can have different scopes; they can be entirely open or outline possible answers; they might be something one experiences by oneself, or they might be directed at others. More importantly, questions can have different existential modalities. On the one hand, they can be rhetorical questions. We might acknowledge the possibility that things may be different from how they appear, without truly believing it or without seeing it as relevant to us. These, however, are not genuine questions, as they do not involve a genuine confrontation with indetermination and a genuine effort to determine the truth of things.³⁴ On the other hand, we may experience questions in a genuine and intense manner, either due to curiosity (when we sincerely want to know something not directly relevant to us), or because the matter at issue is extremely important to us.³⁵ In the latter case, questions can seize or dominate our entire being. We need to know the answer, we are compelled to search for it, and if we are unable to find it, we suffer.

Despite these differences, all questions are a matter of knowledge (or lack thereof) and bring about a different attitude toward what appears to us. What, then, is specific about philosophical questions?

There are several important features that philosophical questions usually share. First, they typically refer to a different type of object, in that they do not just ask about particular things in specific contexts, but rather about general or abstract entities – which gives them a more holistic dimension. Second, they often inquire into what constitutes our way of seeing things, how we value them or even what makes

34) An example of this attitude is the opening words to Francis Bacon's essay on Truth: "What is truth? said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer" (Bacon, *Complete Essays*, 3).

35) On the topic of curiosity as a form of intense, but not genuine interest in a question, see for example Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.35.54; and Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §36.

our experience as such possible – in other words, they inquire into our subjectivity, which shapes the totality of our experience. Third, philosophical questions are also characterized by a different relation to language or discourse, in that they frequently involve a clearer – or at least more refined – language (especially concepts and even complex jargon). Fourth, philosophical questions are rational in an eminent sense, which means that they demand and scrutinize reasons or arguments to accept or reject any possible answer.

These questions thus involve an intensified relation to our way of seeing things or to knowledge. They have a greater scope, are more clearly formulated, and demand more than other questions in general. Consequently, they can bring about greater indetermination, a more intense need for certainty, and deeper disturbance in life. However, like other questions, philosophical questions also admit of different existential modalities. They might be rhetorical or simply part of one's job as a teacher or a researcher, they can be the object of a more or less intense intellectual curiosity, or they can profoundly impact on the way we see things, ourselves, and life in general. In some cases, we may even become a question unto ourselves, to use Augustine's famous expression.³⁶

It is also important to remark that most questions are optional or incidental, and this appears to be especially true for philosophical questions. We usually have strong beliefs and sometimes circumstances compel us to face particular (predominantly concrete) questions. However, some philosophers disagree with this and regard questions – particularly philosophical questions – as a constitutive element of the human mind. Plato, for instance, defines thought as a dialogue of the soul with itself, in which it asks itself questions and gives itself answers, thereby making judgments (*doxai*) and defining things (which is what allows us to go beyond pure sensations).³⁷ Kant, in turn, argues that reason, by its own nature, poses questions to itself about the most important things (such as whether there is God, whether our soul is immortal, whether we are free) and it needs answers. According to him, we cannot be indifferent in this respect and, more than that, we always adopt particular answers (what he calls natural metaphysics or metaphysics as a natural disposition) and live according to

36) Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.33.50.

37) See Plato, *Philebus*, 38c–d, and *Theaetetus*, 189e–190a.

them.³⁸ If Plato and Kant are correct, questions are therefore at the core of our experience. This does not mean that we need to pose these questions and use philosophical concepts in an explicit manner. The process is mostly tacit and provides us with replies that outline the general structure of reality and what we need to know in order to act. This is our usual way of seeing things and it functions as the backdrop for any question we expressly pose (either rhetorically or passionately). Of course, we may also articulate and develop, especially with the aid of philosophy, the questions that lie at the core of our experience. We can think about possible gaps or errors, as well as alternative ways of seeing things, and this can bring about a deeper interrogative or inquisitive attitude. In this sense, everything we usually consider clear and obvious (so much so that we often do not even think about it) can become uncertain, problematic, and disturbing, as frequently observed in Plato's dialogues.³⁹ But how exactly can that affect our life and how important is it for defining philosophy?

4. The Spirituality of Questions and Philosophical Questioning as a Way of Life

We have observed that questions (at least those that are genuine) involve a cognitive lack, associated with uncertainty and indetermination, and this lack can be felt intensely. Questions can grasp us, and philosophical questions in particular can capture our entire being. As a result, they can have a deep impact on how we understand ourselves, how we see things, and how we live. They can be a transformative experience and can even bring about (or contribute to bringing about) a philosophical life.

This is especially relevant in the context of the PWL paradigm, which acknowledges that philosophy might be (and often is) reduced to a discourse that one can intellectually master without being personally transformed by it. The discourse in question may indeed involve questions or even be structured as a discussion of questions, but

38) See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A vii, A x, B 21.

39) It is unclear whether all our views or beliefs can become uncertain at the same time, especially since it seems necessary to hold some views or beliefs in order to formulate a question. It might be possible to experience some type of absolute questioning, but it probably corresponds more to an experience of absolute wonder or perplexity than to a concrete question. In any case, we can experience profound types of questioning that pervade our entire experience of things.

one may fail to experience these questions as genuine questions. If this occurs and philosophy is reduced to discourse, one is not truly experiencing philosophy, at least not in the manner ancient philosophers and the PWL paradigm comprehends it. It is therefore necessary to change the way we engage with philosophical discourse (arguments, theories, theoretical questions, and so on).

Philosophical questions can play an important role in changing our mode of relation to discourse. If we are able to genuinely experience them, they can help us move away from an unphilosophical life and adopt a life that is affected or determined by philosophical discourse and philosophical practices (regardless of whether it includes or claims to include definitive answers or is still seeking them). In this sense, questions – especially philosophical ones – can become a form of spiritual exercise in the Hadotian sense of the term.⁴⁰ They might come from others or from our own experiences, but we must still pose them, dwell on them, and revisit them repeatedly. Philosophical questions require a great deal of practice and effort. We strive not only to find answers but also to formulate the questions with greater precision and emotional resonance. On the one hand, they engage not only our cognitive abilities but also our capacity to imagine alternative possibilities, experience emotions such as wonder or desire, and adopt specific practices or attitudes. In sum, they engage our whole psyche. On the other hand, by leading us beyond and above our immediate way of seeing things and expanding our consciousness (even if only in the negative sense of becoming aware of what we do not know), philosophical questions can contribute to the development of a cosmic or holistic consciousness. The latter may not necessarily bring the peace of mind Hadot often associates with it in his characterizations of ancient philosophy, as the realization of one's lack of knowledge about the whole can be quite unsettling (as Hadot's own initiatory experience in philosophy demonstrates).⁴¹ One can become aware of one's ignorance about everything (or everything that matters) and experience a profound sense of wonder, which in itself is transformative. In this sense, we could speak of "crisis as a spiritual exercise," to borrow an expression from Marc-Henri Deroche.⁴² One experiences one's lack of knowledge and

40) See in particular Hadot, *What Is Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 81–82.

41) Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, 5–7.

42) See Deroche, "Living Mindfully Through Crisis," 67.

is mobilized by it, as it intensifies the need to radically change one's way of life and actively pursue knowledge or wisdom.

Philosophical questions are thus an important type of spiritual exercise and perhaps even the most important exercise when it comes to making our lives more philosophical. This does not mean that all spiritual exercises should be reduced to questions, but other exercises can also be connected to philosophical questions, as ways that directly or indirectly help us to question better or be more affected by questioning. An excellent example of this centrality of questions can be found in the Platonic dialogues, where Socrates questions his interlocutors not only to help them realize their ignorance, but also to transform their sensibility, reshape pursuits, and ultimately alter their way of life. In doing so, he changes the role that philosophical questions play in their lives and how they experience them. Indeed, we can come to experience philosophical questions at a deeper level, and when this happens, they can even become more than just a means to transform us. Philosophical questions can come to play a central role in one's life or even dominate it. One's actions, efforts, and choices in life will then be motivated by questions and the way they mobilize us. We might dedicate ourselves to them – not as a professional enterprise where we master certain language techniques or language games, but as something we recognize as absolutely valuable or necessary. Moreover, given the difficulty and complexity of philosophical questions, one might be seized by them not only for a long time, but for one's whole life. One will therefore lead a philosophical life in the sense of an inquisitive way of life – a life dedicated to pursuing knowledge or wisdom. One will adopt philosophical questioning as a way of life or experience philosophy not just as a way of life, but as a questioning way of life.

Such a questioning way of life can take various forms. For instance, one might live a life where questions serve as a crucial instrument for finding doctrines, dogmas, or a supposed wisdom one might adopt. This approach could involve establishing some sort of provisional morality, as seen in the case of Descartes. However, once one achieves that goal, one is likely to transition into a dogmatic way of life. On the other hand, constant questioning can also be used as a means of renewing one's insight into one's doctrines or better applying them, or as a form of critical distancing aimed at improving them.⁴³

43) As seen at the end of section 1, Grimm and Cohoe seem to argue along these lines.

More decisively, one can adopt a radically interrogative or inquisitive way of life, in which nothing is settled. In this case, one might still be able to adopt some views as provisional (either common views as a provisional morality or philosophical views that seem more plausible), but one might perceive things as a difficult mystery (which will result in a disturbing and restless experience, and possibly a disturbed and restless form of life). Moreover, one might remain open about the possibility of discovering truth, or one may doubt or even conclude that one cannot attain any truth or wisdom. These and other possibilities have been explored by different philosophers throughout the history of philosophy and correspond to different sensitivities – or different ways of relating – to questions. They overlap in the fact that philosophical questions are a central element of the philosophical transformative process (at least during a certain stage of it). They all involve interrogative practices and may even include exercises that can help us better understand questions or better find answers. They also involve some form of non-interrogative philosophical discourse, but the latter will not be reducible to a set of fixed doctrines. It will encompass at least some uncertainty and obscurity, which will serve as a pathway for further inquiry.

We can thus conceive of philosophical discourse and philosophical life as primarily interrogative. Engaging in such discourse and adopting such a life can be experienced as more or less aggressive, and it can include constant transformations or different forms of life. This is important because, unless we attain perfect and unquestionable knowledge (and it is unclear whether that is even possible), we must admit that philosophy does not necessarily involve peace of mind, a feeling of belonging to the whole, or happiness. As Sellars pointed out, it does not necessarily change our life for the better (or at least for something we would consider better, I would add).⁴⁴ It can even render us misologists.⁴⁵ Still, it is no less philosophical, and we could even argue that it is more philosophical (especially if it happens to be the case that most of the beliefs that tranquillize us are insufficiently examined and may well be illusory or greatly simplified views of reality). It might indeed be more philosophical to fully embrace questioning and the desire for wisdom.

44) Sellars, "What Is Philosophy as a Way of Life," 41.

45) Compare Plato, *Phaedo*, 89d–91c.

This is precisely what I am proposing as an alternative way of understanding PWL. Instead of conceiving of PWL as an application or implementation of doctrines, PWL (both as a proposal for the contemporary practice of philosophy and as a historiographical concept) should be understood as being at its core a genuine experience of philosophical questioning (whether it becomes a permanent condition or is just a stage in the path to perfect wisdom). This seems to be an essential part of philosophy and its transformative process. It does not prevent questions from being accompanied by philosophical ideas, insights, or even doctrines, since all these things help frame and understand questions or the angle of questioning. However, what should be conceived as primarily philosophical and primarily life impactful is not any doctrinal or dogmatic component, but instead ways of questioning.

5. On the History of Philosophical Questioning as a Way of Life

After discussing the details of the interrogative or erotetic model of PWL that I am proposing, we can better understand its implications for the history of philosophy in general and, specifically, for the history of philosophy as a way of life. The erotetic model emphasizes the role of philosophical questions in this history – not only in philosophical discourse and practices in general, but also in philosophical spirituality. Hence, the task of outlining a history of PWL should focus on the presence of questions, their transformative value, and their existential role in the works and practices of different philosophers. Instead of being a history of the development and application of philosophical doctrines or worldviews, the history of PWL becomes a history of philosophical questioning as a way of life (PQWL), or the history of how different styles of questioning have affected life and made it more philosophical. It is not solely and not primarily a history of specific questions or of the methodological role of questions (although that is included). Instead, it is a history of how one develops the ability to experience questions and how they can impact life (or the role they play in philosophical spirituality). It considers not only how philosophers discuss questions and their role in these philosophers' discourse, but also how these questions relate to the practical dimension of their thought. In this sense, it is both a history of philosophy (or philosophical discourse) as questioning and a history of philosophy as a way of life, primarily understood as philosophy as a questioning or inquisitive way of life.

It is important to note that the scope of this history of PQWL is as problematic as the scope of PWL as it is typically understood. We can have a narrower understanding of PWL, which focuses only on philosophers who give special consideration to the practical aspect of philosophy, or a broader understanding that includes all philosophies where there is some connection between philosophical discourse (or inquiry) and life transformation, even if it is not a central concern of the philosopher in question.⁴⁶ The same applies to PQWL, and I think it is important to explore this broader understanding, especially as it allows for different degrees of spirituality or different connections between philosophy and spirituality. In many cases, questions may start as theoretical, but they also lead to incorporating philosophy into life. Hence, even theoretical questions tend to transform us and take on a spiritual dimension.

Moreover, the history of PQWL must consider different perspectives or attitudes to questions. For some philosophers, questions play a preliminary role that is later to be overcome as they attain perfect knowledge, or what they perceive to be so (even though in many cases we can also interpret these philosophers as regarding their own doctrines as hypothetical or provisional). For other philosophers, questioning or an interrogative attitude is at the center of their thought, either because they fail to find satisfactory answers or because they view knowledge as unattainable or even an absurd concept. In any case, what matters most for the history of PQWL is how they see philosophical discourse as not only transformative, but also involving a transformation through questioning – wherein questions assume a greater or lesser spiritual role.

Considering the discursive and spiritual role of questions in philosophy (and in the history of PWL in particular) is, of course, an impossible task for just one article. However, a brief and very incomplete demonstration of what the history of PWL as a history of PQWL could look like, what aspects of the history of philosophy it could focus on, and what type of reading it could develop will help clarify my point. To do so, I will focus on some of the most important philosophers of the Western tradition, but this history could and should be extended beyond this tradition.

The history of PQWL could begin with an interpretation of the first philosophers such as the one developed by Giorgio Colli, who associates the birth of philosophy

46) Some have even conceived of it as a global approach to Western philosophy (see Sharpe and Ure, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 323–24).

with the gradual loss of an ineffable and holistic experience of reality that was characteristic of mythological thinking and, to a certain extent, of Pre-Socratic sages.⁴⁷ Philosophy questions this holistic experience, and this questioning was further developed by the Sophists (mostly as a rhetorical exercise combined with relativism) and by Socrates (as a passionate pursuit of the wisdom one lacks). In this interpretation, Socrates is a sage only in the specific sense outlined in Plato's *Apology*: namely, a sage who is aware of his own ignorance (compare PW, 105–106). He questions himself and others and this leads them to live a philosophical life, understood as a life devoted to the pursuit of wisdom. Plato, in turn, is often interpreted in a more dogmatic manner, whether by referring to unwritten doctrines or to doctrines that are concealed in his dialogues. However, there are also many who have explored a more skeptical reading, which acknowledges the difficulty of identifying clear-cut doctrines in the dialogues. For such interpreters, the dialogues do not present a unitarian doctrine, or sequence of different views, not even a propaedeutics, but rather they can be seen as explorations of questions and an illustration of an intense pursuit of wisdom.

Similarly, other ancient philosophers can be read in a more skeptical or heuristic way. Aristotle's inquiries often have a tentative and provisional tone. He considers past philosophers and common opinions, explores different views, and revises his own views. In contrast, there is a stronger tendency within Hellenistic schools to establish doctrines or accept established doctrines. However, instead of simply looking for the dogmas of each school, we may also explore how these schools question social customs and one's habits in light of these doctrines. Furthermore, we can focus on inner differences or even quarrels regarding the school's doctrines, and how they translate into different spiritual practices and different ways of living. A similar approach can be applied to Neoplatonism, both in its original form and in its Christian adaptations. Despite describing the whole structure of reality as coming from the One or God, these forms of Neoplatonism question many things (such as the status of empirical reality or how to comprehend and embrace the first principle of reality), change the way we see things and ourselves, and can assume several different forms – some more rational and dogmatic (e.g. Plotinus), and others more mystical and intuitive (such as Pseudo-Dionysus and Scotus Erigena).

47) Colli, *La nascita della filosofia*.

Something analogous could be said of medieval philosophy as a whole. Due to its connection with revelation, it generally tends to assume a dogmatic form and regard itself as a form of wisdom (sacred wisdom). However, despite faith providing a certain type of truth (or supposed truth), this does not preclude the pursuit of a deeper understanding, as expressed in Anselm's motto *fides quaerens intellectum*. Augustine, for instance, acknowledged the importance of constantly revising his positions.⁴⁸ Much of medieval philosophy, including Scholasticism, demonstrates an interrogative attitude, which manifests itself not only in many important intellectual debates, but also in various forms of spirituality and diverse effects on one's life.

Renaissance philosophers retrieved many aspects of ancient philosophy and embraced the idea that philosophy should have a deep impact on one's life separately from religion.⁴⁹ In some cases (such as Erasmus and Montaigne), they explicitly embraced a more Socratic or skeptical attitude, centering their philosophical practice around questioning and cognitive humility. This starkly contrasts with Descartes and other rationalist philosophers like Leibniz and Spinoza, who constructed intricate theoretical systems claiming to solve all the main problems of philosophy. In this sense, they seem to deviate from both PWL and the primacy of questions. However, not only can we find transformative or spiritual elements in their philosophy, but their thought also originates from the need to question their beliefs. This is evident in Descartes' methodic doubt and Spinoza's project of emending the intellect, both of which arguably have a spiritual dimension.⁵⁰ Moreover, there are modern philosophers such as Pascal or Hume who adopt skeptical stances in their theories and philosophical practice, and their ethical life is intrinsically connected with this interrogative or skeptical attitude, which leads them to faith and emotion. Kant, in turn, combines both tendencies. He recognizes that reason is faced with questions it cannot answer, but approaching these questions critically preserves not only empirical knowledge, but also morality, thus linking questions with how we live.

Two strong tendencies stem from Kant. On the one hand, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel focus on the possibility of rational subjects attaining some form of perfect

48) See *De Dono Perseverantiae*, 21.55.

49) See for example Sellars, "Renaissance Humanism and Philosophy as a Way of Life."

50) See D'Agostino, *Spiritual Exercises and Early Modern Philosophy*.

knowledge of reality. As such, their philosophies have a strong theoretical component. Nevertheless, these theoretical systems also include practical consequences, and the latter involve performing critical and dialectical questioning (even though the emphasis is always placed on theoretical knowledge as such). In contrast, philosophers such as Jacobi, Hamann, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche have a strong anti-rationalist strain and develop philosophical criticisms of philosophy. This allows them to focus more intently on existential aspects. Their philosophical practice is intrinsically linked to questioning theory and reason, and generally includes a strong anti-dogmatic bent (as we see, for instance, in Kierkegaard's ethical individualism or Nietzsche's emphasis on the creation of values and his perspectivism).

Philosophers in the twentieth century also embraced the PWL paradigm and developed variations of PWL in which questions play a central role. Pragmatists, for instance, valued inquiry as a central aspect of the definition of truth. The later Wittgenstein viewed philosophy as a practice of questioning philosophical questions themselves, which also influenced how we see ourselves and live. Husserlian phenomenology hinged on the suspension of judgment as a methodological and practical cornerstone. Heidegger began *Being and Time* by claiming that the question of the meaning of being has been forgotten and needs to be revived.⁵¹ Elsewhere, he argued that philosophy and metaphysics hinge on a form of questioning that completely grips us, and later stated that "questioning is the piety of thought," making it a central aspect of his reconceiving of philosophy as thinking.⁵² French existentialism emphasized human freedom and the lack of a final answer on how to live. Consequently, each individual must constantly discover their own answers on how to exist. The Frankfurt School criticized forms of social and political life and their underlying ideology as a means of promoting freedom. Foucault developed a method of critiquing or questioning forms of knowledge and power, and later focused on philosophy (especially ancient philosophy) as a form of freedom and self-creation. Deleuze conceived of philosophy as the creation of concepts, which reshape what he calls "events" and open up new possibilities of living. Stanley Cavell's perfectionism involves questioning each

51) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, xix, 1–3.

52) See, respectively, Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, §§3, 15, and *The Question Concerning Technology*, 35.

particular form life assumes in order to overcome it. The list could go on and include many other philosophers up to the present day.⁵³

We can draw some conclusions from this very quick overview of how philosophers valued questions not only in philosophical discourse, but also in philosophical spirituality and life. First, we confirmed that many philosophers view questions as a theoretical (and existential) stage to be overcome on the path to true knowledge or wisdom, while others see them as a state in which we are to remain or to which we must constantly return (resisting dogmatic tendencies). However, even those who think they have achieved some type of solid knowledge or wisdom often find themselves questioning and reevaluating their ideas. Furthermore, all philosophers are questioned by their contemporaries and future generations. If we focus on them as a group, they provide us with many diverse perspectives and make it very difficult to hold absolute beliefs. This is often understood (even by Hadot) as something that allows us to choose from multiple doctrines, but it can also deeply unsettle us. Indeed, the most significant aspect of this alternative history of philosophy as a history of PQWL is perhaps the emphasis it places on doubt, perplexity, and disorientation, as well as the unsettling effect philosophy can have. The history of philosophy becomes a history of both theoretical and existential restlessness, aligning with Novalis' definition of philosophy as a "longing for home."⁵⁴

Conclusion

The preceding discussion concerned the question of whether or not the experience of genuine questioning (i.e., doubt, wonder, aporia, or crisis) is compatible with PWL. I tried to show that philosophy can be seen as an unsettled way of being in the world while still adhering to the Hadotian idea that philosophy is "a mode of existing-in-the-world" that has "to be practiced at each instant," and whose goal is "to transform the whole of the individual's life" (PW, 265). Furthermore, I argued that

53) The list could also extend beyond the Western tradition and include other forms of philosophy that are not reducible to the possession of wisdom, but include (or even consist of) forms of questioning or interrogative attitudes that transform one's life. See for example Tubali, *The Transformative Philosophical Dialogue*.

54) Novalis' dictum is quoted and discussed in Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, §§2–3.

PWL should not be primarily understood in terms of attained wisdom, as this tends to reduce it to the implementation of dogmas or worldviews. Instead, I advocated for an interrogative turn in PWL. We should view questions as an essential aspect of philosophy and PWL, either in the sense that philosophy can be understood as an essentially questioning or inquisitive way of life, or in the more modest sense that allows for elements of wisdom, but still highlights the importance of questions in each philosopher's theory and practice. It is crucial to appreciate questions and their disruptive nature in the context of PWL, both when considering how we should understand and practice philosophy nowadays, and when examining the history of philosophy or PWL. Only then can we avoid a dogmatic understanding of philosophy that neglects or underestimates its inquisitive and restless dimension.

As demonstrated in the previous section, this shift in our conception of PWL (or at least this particular specification of the concept) affects how we interpret different philosophers and prompts us to question the instances and best examples of PWL in the Western philosophical tradition (as well as the connections between this tradition and other philosophical traditions around the planet). Similarly, this interrogative turn has profound implications for academic research, discussion and teaching. Philosophy should concern itself not only with having an existential impact, but also with fostering (through arguments and practices) a deep existential experience of questioning (rather than striving to live according to some philosophical views or wisdom). In the field of education, this model would involve not only favoring a more Socratic method of question and answer, but also cultivating an attitude of critical inquiry and wonder. This does not exclude teaching philosophical doctrines, but they should be accompanied by exercises that encourage questioning them (such as carefully considering their main criticisms). Teaching should begin with at least some genuine existential perplexity, bewilderment, and disorientation, and possibly lead back to it. Students should also be asked to develop their own answers, question them, and consider the implications of their questioning. Therefore, within the PWL paradigm, education should not be primarily concerned with imparting a worldview and the techniques for living according to it, but rather with stimulating ways of becoming more inquisitive and living a more questioning life. Of course, this approach can be risky, especially with young students, so it would be necessary to determine the appropriate age, methods, and support for implementing it.

Several objections could be raised against this approach. First, we must consider that many philosophers, both throughout history and in the present, have presented their ideas as wisdom (even if they often came to question them). There is a strong inclination to claim that one possesses wisdom and even that one acts according to it. In response, we could say that this stance seems incongruous with philosophy's fundamental vocation as a pursuit of wisdom. At best, it is the result of such a pursuit and something that falls outside of it. Second, one might argue that questions are never the end goal of philosophy. We do not want to dwell on them. However, even if questions are not the ultimate objective, they may be an essential condition for philosophy. Wisdom may really be a transcendent ideal, which would imply that there is no definitive guidance on what to do. We must always continue to question any perspectives we develop. Third, this model raises doubts about the usefulness of philosophy. While some may see advantages in developing critical thinking, living in a perpetual state of questioning might make us feel completely adrift. We seem to require some form of knowledge and guidance. Constantly attacking them may be dangerous. Additionally, this renders philosophy and PWL a tough sell. Within a Hadotian framework, one can use the ideas of freedom, tranquility, and cosmic consciousness as protreptic or marketing tools for philosophy. But how can we convince someone that a questioning attitude and a questioning way of life are desirable? Philosophers may be worst off in this regard. On the other hand, one could also question whether philosophy should have an immediate and clear usefulness. Moreover, even though philosophers might feel more disoriented and appear to be worse off, they can also be better off from a different perspective – for instance, they may be less deceived or more attentive to and caring for themselves and others.

In sum, there seems to be no decisive reason to preclude the interrogative turn in PWL studies that I am proposing. On the contrary, this approach offers several advantages. For instance, it allows us to avoid illusions of wisdom and too rigid a concept of philosophy (or of any doctrinal core philosophy may have). Philosophy in general, as well as specific philosophies, are not regarded as finished products, but rather as an active tension toward understanding, knowledge or wisdom. They represent a provisional, dynamic, and unsettled state. This prevents the temptation to reduce philosophy to coaching, self-help, or even religion, as the latter always involve a dogmatic or sapiential component. Moreover, it limits philosophy's inclination toward abso-

lutism and paternalism, since there will be no completely settled doctrine to impose on others. At most, one can share the experience of questioning and the longing for wisdom, but even the exact value of this experience is uncertain. Philosophizing may provide a deeper connection with oneself, others, and life in general, but it can also be experienced as a crisis or complete disorientation. In sum, the interrogative model of PWL requires us to embrace philosophy's ambiguity and its potential to both corrupt and save our life.

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