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Matthew Sharpe
Advisory Board
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8165-5775
msharpe@deakin.edu.au

Eli Kramer
Editor
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7535-030X
eliorner.kramer@uwr.edu.pl

Michael Chase
Advisory Board
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9255-5721
chasemike780@gmail.com

Pressing Questions for the Philosophical Life in a Time of Crisis

Introduction

2020, the year the coronavirus pandemic spread globally, marked the twenty-fifth year since the publication of Pierre Hadot's work *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (translated by co-author Michael Chase). In that time, what began as the research specialization of just a few scholars has become a growing area of philosophical and metaphilosophical inquiry, bringing together researchers from around the globe. Hadot's key ideas of spiritual exercises, and the very idea of PWL, have been applied to a host of individual thinkers from across the history of philosophy: from the Hellenistic and Roman-era philosophers of direct concern to Hadot, through renaissance thinkers like Petrarch, Lipsius, Montaigne, Descartes, or Bacon, into nineteenth-century thinkers led by

Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche.[1] In more recent years, more global reflections on the "very idea" of PWL have begun to emerge, as well as dedicated journal editions. In these more recent PWL studies, some of the manifold research questions have begun to be explored, which were opened up by the studies of Pierre and Ilsetraut Hadot, as well as its reception in Michel Foucault's later work.[2]

What implications, after all, does understanding the history of PWL, and the predominance of this metaphilosophical conception in the history of Western thought, have for how we understand the practice(s) of philosophy today? Does recovering the alternative understandings of philosophy as a practice in history necessarily lead to a criticism of contemporary, solely academic or theoretical modes of philosophizing, or is the idea of PWL one which has only historiographical force?

If we are persuaded by the merits of older ways of doing philosophy, involving regimens of spiritual exercises, can such modes of philosophizing be revived today? If so, how and in what venues? Is it impossible to teach PWL, except in courses on the history of ideas, as something belonging only and ever to the past? Or can PWL be integrated into the ways we teach, the ways we hold conferences, or even the ways we assess students? Does, for example, Hadot's deep interest in Socrates,[3] and conception of Socratic dialogue as a spiritual exercise, point the way toward a refashioning of the modern philosophical classroom to a venue in which students do not just learn old ideas, as so many "dead letters," but are prompted to self-examination? What complications or obstacles present themselves to such pedagogical applications of PWL, and are they insurmountable? Or does the uptake of PWL in extra-academic groups and movements, like those associated with Modern Stoicism, point the way to the only possible re-actualization of older ways of philosophizing – albeit, in ways raising its own questions?

A different set of queries surrounds Hadot's openness to reading many genres of ancient writings which we do not today credit as philosophical, like poems, meditations, and dialogues. Does this speak to a need to reconsider how we write philosophy, and seek in particular to attract new audiences to become philosophers, exploring different literary genres and rhetorical schemas and styles? Or is its implication only historiographical, asking us to reshape our sense of the boundaries of what philosophy was in different, now-defunct periods?

At another, more theoretical level, in what sense (if any) does it even make sense to consider the possibility of reactualizing PWL, with direct recourse to ancient philosophers like Zeno, Chrysippus, Cleanthes, Panaetius, Posidonius, Musonius Rufus, Seneca, Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius? Were not the Stoics famed in

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1) See for example Juliusz Domański, *La Philosophie, théorie ou manière de vivre?: les controverses de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance, avec une préface de Pierre Hadot* (Paris and Fribourg [Suisse]: Cerf Presses Universitaires Fribourg, 1997); Stephan Gaukroger, *Francis Bacon and the Transformation of Early-Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001); John Sellars, "Justus Lipsius's *De Constantia*: A Stoic Spiritual Exercise," *Poetics Today* 28, no. 3 (2007): 339–62. Sorana Corneanu, *Regimens of the Mind: Boyle, Locke, and the Early Modern Cultura Animi Tradition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Christopher S. Celenza, "What Counted as Philosophy in the Italian Renaissance? The History of Philosophy, the History of Science, and Styles of Life," *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 2 (2014): 367–401; Matthew Sharpe, "The Georgics of the Mind and the Architecture of Fortune: Francis Bacon's Therapeutic Ethics," *Philosophical Papers* 43, no. 1 (2014): 89–121; Keith Ansell-Pearson, "True to the Earth: Nietzsche's Epicurean Care of Self and World," in *Nietzsche's Therapeutic Teaching*, eds. H. Hutter and E. Friedland (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 97–116; Michael Ure, "Nietzsche's Ethics of Self-Cultivation & Eternity," in *Ethics & Self-Cultivation*, eds. Sander Werkhoven and Matthew Dennis, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives (London: Routledge, 2018), 84–103.

2) See for example Sellars, "Justus Lipsius's *De Constantia*"; Ian Hunter, "The History of Philosophy and the Persona of the Philosopher," *Modern Intellectual History* 4, no. 3 (2007): 571–600; James M. Ambury, Tushar Irani, and Kathleen Wallace, eds., *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Historical, Contemporary, and Pedagogical Perspectives* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020); Matthew Sharpe, "On the Very Idea of Ancient Philosophy as a Way of Life," *Rhizomata* 8, no. 2 (2021): 183–217; Matthew Sharpe and Michael Ure, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: History, Dimensions, Directions* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

3) Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995), chapt. 4: "The Figure of Socrates."

antiquity for the internal coherence of their philosophical vision, a vision in which ethics was seen as interdependent not only with logic, but with a set of understandings of the physical world which the modern sciences have long since transcended? Must not therefore any "modern Stoicism" (and perhaps any modern Epicureanism or Platonism or even Aristotelianism) that might emerge involve a kind of cherry-picking, "Stoicism lite" or "Epicureanism lite"? But then again, is it not possible and legitimate, in the light of the practical dimensions of philosophizing stressed by PWL, for moderns to reactivate forms of spiritual exercise, like the view from above, without holding to ancient metaphysical and physical beliefs? Was it not Hadot himself who stressed the significance of creative misunderstandings in the history of philosophy,[4] as well who advocated for practicing eclecticism, adopting doctrines and approaches from a variety of philosophical schools?[5] Can some of these ancient spiritual exercises, if not all, be taken up in a way which brackets larger commitment to the ancient philosophical systems within which they were initially presented?

A different set of questions again looms on the horizons when we ask what the advent of technology harbinges for the prospects of PWL. On one hand, the new availability of ancient texts, and the new capacities for international contact, teaching, and proselytization have certainly made "Modern Stoicism's" extraordinary global growth possible, in ways inconceivable even in the mid-1990s, when Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life* was published. One of the more unusual phenomena of the iPhone age is the proliferation of Stoic "apps" containing texts and guides to practice, even guided meditations – alongside *memento mori* apps, for instance, which one can set reminders for oneself of the fugacity of time, and the number of days, weeks, and years one likely can live, all being well.

On the other hand, philosophy in the modern German tradition especially has a long history of concern about the destructive and dehumanizing potentials of technological development. In the work of a figure like Heidegger, we find deep anxieties that *Technik* has an ontological life of its own, which human beings must remain unable to harness as a mere instrument for their ends. Pierre Hadot, influenced as a young man by Goethe, Schiller, and (to a degree) Heidegger, and returning to their work in his long study *The Veil of Isis* on competing Western understandings of nature, at times expressed similar concerns about the "Promethean" attitude to nature – one of wresting her secrets from her by force or trickery, as against approaching the natural world in a gentler, more "Orphic" manner.[6]

Are the kinds of meditative and contemplative knowing and practice we find in premodern philosophical and religious traditions, which Hadot in *Veil of Isis* aligned with the ancient figure of the musical Orpheus, conceivable today? Orpheus was not only musical, of course, but a philosopher and religious mystic: for Hadot, he represented the contemplative, respectful attitude of listening to nature and waiting for her to reveal her secrets, rather than torturing her by experimentation.[7] Will we, be able to follow in his footsteps without turning back, or rather, like everything else, be caught up in the maelstrom, packaged, commodified, cheapened and hollowed out, by our technological mediations in modern mass societies? Or must PWL, if it is to be a live option today, represent a form of individual or shared rebellion against the technological age? Must we consider the very idea of "spiritual exercises" – practices engaging the "entire psychism" of an individual, and undertaken with no other end than the transformation of the "I" that their repeated practice will engender[8] – as something like a small rebellion of this kind? Or is the goal of wisdom, at which these exercises were positioned by the ancients as aiming, not itself inconceivable in a world in which the human mind seems to have conquered everything else, to remain constantly prey to anxieties that it has lost its own soul thereby? As Hadot opens his extraordinary piece on "The Figure of the Sage":

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[4] Ibid., 71–77.

[5] See for example Pierre Hadot, Jeannie Carlier, and Arnold I. Davison, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, trans. Marc Djaballah and Michael Chase, "Cultural Memory in the Present," Second Revised Edition (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 102–13.

[6] For more see Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 150–51.

[7] See Ibid., 95–98.

> We live in a civilization where the domain of science is totally autonomous, and independent of ethical and existential values. This is precisely the problem, if not the drama of our times, as Georges Friedman has clearly shown in his book, *La Puissance et la Sagesse* (*Power and Wisdom*). How will the modern world rediscover wisdom, that is to say a form of knowledge or a consciousness which does not bear solely upon the objects of knowledge [*connaissance*], but upon life itself taken in its lived everydayness and the way in which we live and exist?[9]

Hadot's later work on the philosophy of nature, and exploring competing ways in which the natural world has been understood, goes a long way back in his own intellectual itinerary. His still-untranslated, vital early piece "Apport du néoplatonisme à la philosophie de la nature en occident" of 1970 ["The Contribution of Neoplatonism to the Philosophy of Nature in the West"], indeed concludes in the following terms, which make a reconsidered vision of the natural world the very key to any rehabilitation of philosophy as a way of life (PWL):

> It seems to me that the principal task of a philosophy of nature consists in seeking to enlarge the possibilities of human perception, to reteach us how to perceive (*regard*) the world. Modern humanity, like the gnostic, is separated (*coupé*) from the sensible world, by the artificiality of the economic and technical world. [Her] perception of the natural world is more and more atrophied. It seems to me that there is a sort of moral demand (*exigence*) which is imposed upon us: to try to save the possibilities of perception which are within the human (*qui sont en l'homme*). Only a philosophy of nature could re-give to humanity the secret of the art of living (*l'art de vivre*). We need to learn anew to read the hieroglyphic of nature, to respectfully decipher its "signatures," heavy with sense.[10]

This second installment of *Eidos* dedicated to PWL carries forward this recent movement within the international scholarship to examine some of the many questions which the recovery of this older sense of philosophy – and perhaps of nature, humanity, and the world – poses, especially in a time of heightening crises. The papers collected in the following edition examine issues around PWL and nature (and "wildness"), PWL, and pedagogy, PWL and the protreptic use of literature (and publicly performed dialogues) to engage different audiences, PWL and the place and need of Socratic dialogue as a spiritual practice, and PWL and technology. They all suggest in different ways PWL's ability to open the possibility of richer and more meaningful alternative cultures and practices, like gardening, which are consolation for today's harried souls. They can help us rediscover different ways of perceiving the world, experiencing time, and thinking about ourselves.

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[8] See Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, chapt. 3: "Spiritual Exercises," 82.

[9] Pierre Hadot, "The Figure of the Sage," in *Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot: Philosophy as Practice*, trans. Matthew Sharpe and Federico Testa (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 185.

[10] Pierre Hadot, "Apport du néoplatonisme à la philosophie de la nature en occident," trans. Matthew Sharpe, in *Das Eranos-Jahrbuch im Rhein-Verlag* (Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1970), 123.

The Thematic Section begins with two pieces the explore our alignment with nature as a personal and pedagogical resource in a time of crises and deep uncertainty. We begin our thematic section with Monika Favara's essay "Reclaiming Time Aesthetically: Hadot, Spiritual Exercises and Gardening." She explores in this piece how gardening can approximate the role of ancient spiritual exercises that helped one find oneself a part of larger natural and cosmic processes, without being weighed down with metaphysical conceptions that are no longer live options for modern people. She shows how gardening interrupts the hectic pace of modern temporal duration, as well as the monotony and depression caused by the Covid-19 Pandemic lockdowns. Gardening can potentially be a PWL spiritual exercise because, if done as a sensitive and thoughtful practice, it can incite reflection on our relationship to, and as a part of, "natural" temporal processes, and better align us to them.

While Favara shows the value of engagement with cultivated nature as a spiritual exercise, Tess Varner in "Recovering Wildness: 'Earthy' Education and Field Philosophy," invites us to return to the wilderness as an essential part of a PWL pedagogy (and liberal education more generally) during a time of crisis and instability. Drawing on the works of John Dewey, John William Miller, and Douglas Anderson she shows wilderness as an open engagement with broader natural patterns and time, as something lived like Favara, but outside and growing without our direct hand at the till, even though we are a part of these processes. She offers clear and helpful examples of how to engage with "wilderness" in the PWL classroom.

Edward Spence shows a way a different way PWL can inspire us to meaning in these trying times. In, "Philosophy Plays: A Neo-Socratic Way of Performing Public Philosophy," he elucidates the value his philosophy plays as a form of public PWL, making relevant philosophy in popular culture through a mix of dialectics (philosophical reflection) and rhetoric (alluring psychogogy) to engage the broader public in critical shared reasoning on the good life for one and all. The plays, usually held at restaurants, theaters, opera houses, and so forth, revive the spirit of Plato's *Symposium*, of the pleasure of a banquet, to deeply reflect on our lives. The paper explores the nature and structure of these plays, and includes examples, and an excerpt from one of them.

We conclude the Thematic Section with John Vervaeke's and Christopher Mastropietro's essay, "Dialectic into Dialogos and the Pragmatics of No-thingness in a Time of Crisis." This piece continues to draw upon Socratic practice to deal with the crises of our times. In this case they engage with "the meaning crises" of late modernity, where the ability to find meaning in life and the world is a struggle as we navigate an increasingly isolated, uprooted, unstable, and gloomy world situation. Through a skillfully woven intercultural tapestry, Vervaeke and Mastropietro address one perennial aspect to this crisis, the confrontation with nihilism of nothingness. They advocate for the spiritual exercises of transforming nothingness into collective experiences of "no-thingness," an empowered relationship with necessity and the possible through dialogical engagement with the other as part of authentic and developing collective experiences. They ground this approach in a study of our linguistic engagements with each other as we move from debate, to dialectics, and finally through *dialogos*, which to our sense moves one from the *aporia* of the early Platonic dialogues to the flashes of inspiration Plato discusses in *The Seventh Letter.*

We begin the Forum section with another PWL oriented piece. Piotr Dobkowski in "Technological Exercises" expands beyond Foucault's vision of spiritual exercises as "technologies of the self," by reflecting more generally on what role technology might play within the heuristic of spiritual exercises. It thoughtfully brings together scholars from the Weimar Republic into dialogue with Foucault and Hadot. He takes us through the more hopeful conception of the potential of technology in Ernst Cassirer, and the more cynical (if not sometimes apocalyptic) views of Oswald Spengler, and Friedrich Jünger (though Junger sees some positive value to technology, for example in the bicycle), alongside the more internalized, progressive views for self-development and personal freedom that Foucault offers. Dobkowski syncretizes their insights to a provide an account of what John Dewey (if he were to read this paper) might call the role of "spiritual exercises in the reconstructive efforts of culture." By this creative anachronism we mean that Dobkowski suggests that spiritual exercises, in order to be effective, ought to be sensitive to the constant shifts in cultural life, especially as technology increasingly shapes our lives. The most effective PWL practice meets this situation head on and uses its own technologies of the self to help us to live more meaningful, authentic, and flourishing lives.

The Forum section is concluded by Charles Herrman's memorial essay to the late anthropologist, philosopher, and anarchist activist (as one of the leading theoretical sources for the Occupy Wall Street Movement) David Graeber. Herrman creates a thoughtful dialogue with him, ranging from the role of honor and dignity-based cultures in society, to our dysfunctional civilization. Graeber enacted his philosophical commitments, and not only engaged, but activated the agora in the genuine spirit of Socrates and Diogenes to meaningfully address the most pressing issues of our times.

Like our previous issue, there are two essays in our Discussion Section that were tied to our theme but in terms of style sit outside of the peer review essay. We begin with a reflection on a broad based and bold aesthetic-philosophical practice for our times by the eminent philosophy as a way of life advocate Richard Shusterman. In his essay, "Aesthetic Experience at the Borders of Art and Life: The Case of the Man in Gold," he reflects on his work broadening the scope and depth of philosophical aesthetics, and what it means to enact and perform artistic and philosophical living, through his performance art and Diogenic practice as the Man in Gold. In turn J.P. Rosensweig in his Bugbeean phenomenological meditation "Philosophy for the Soul" addresses the central question of the relevance of PWL in a time of crises, by showing its enduring relevance through his work running The Philosophy Institute, which offers PWL inspired courses to the public (physical and virtually) in the US. Each of the last three pieces in their own ways are a fitting closure to the second of our PWL issues. They show yet another example of how the spirit of PWL is revitalized in different ages and contexts, and develops the spiritual exercises, genres of writing, and critical assessments needed to challenge and make room for meaningful, even revolutionary, living, especially during difficult times.