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Introduction to Philosophy of Pierre Hadot Or On to Spiritual Exercises

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By focusing on the key concepts of the French philosopher Pierre Hadot – conversion and spiritual exercises – this article provides introduction of the views of this philosopher. Hadot's main research interest was ancient philosophy, and thus he has developed an innovative method for understanding the philosophy of this period. Hadot points out that from his point of view ancient philosophy was primarily a way of life and therefore must be understood as "spiritual exercises". This concept is understood as an effort in changing and transforming the self, which is called conversion in the philosophy of Hadot.

Keywords: Pierre Hadot, spiritual exercises, conversion, ancient philosophy.

Introduction

From the very beginnings of Western philosophy¹ thinkers have given countless definitions of philosophy from the position of their doctrines. Despite the fact that there have always existed many different interpretations of this discipline, an established stereotype of the philosopher as a theoretician has persisted even until today. It is a stereotype that depicts a professional, who is discussing abstract and theoretical questions within the grasp of the conceptual material known only by himself and others of his kind, alienating this reasoning from the on goings of the everyday life. By exploring the views of the French philosopher Pierre Hadot (1922 – 2010), this article will try to describe an alternative understanding of philosophy.

Pierre Hadot was a philosopher and historian whose general research focus was ancient philosophy. By describing his scientific efforts, the Latvian philosopher Igors Suvajevs points out that the works of Hadot can be divided in two distinct parts. (Suvajevs, 2008, 116) The first part is translations, reconstructed texts and commentary. Hadot has published works of Plotinus, Marius Victorinus, Ambrosius, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus. The other part consists of his own researches and reflections: "Marius Victorinus" (1960), "Porphyry and Victorinus" (1968), "Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision" (1963), "Spiritual exercises and ancient philosophy" (1981), "The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius" (1992), "What is ancient philosophy" (1995), "Studies in Ancient Philosophy" (1998), "Philosophy as a Way of

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Life” (2002), “Wittgenstein And The Limits Of Language” (2004) etc.

Summarizing his conceptual frameworks, Hadot indicates that from his point of view philosophy must be defined as “spiritual exercises”. (Адо, 2005, 342) In order to successfully understand and interpret views of ancient philosophers, this is the aspect, to be taken into account. To the contemporary reader, the philosophical works of this period may seem clumsy, unsystematic, and even contradictory. Hadot draws attention to the fact that the ancient philosophical schools never considered theory as an end in itself; it is clearly and decidedly put in the service of practice. In other words, ancient philosophy was intended to transform, and not to inform, (Адо, 2005, 344) and these transformations were enacted by spiritual exercises. Further on we will try to understand the conception of “spiritual exercises” by analyzing the works of Hadot.

Different philosophies

When he described contemporary philosophy, Hadot often pointed out that although we do have teachers of philosophy today, we have no philosophers. (Адо, 2005, 310). Hadot came to the idea of a conflict between philosophy and the teaching of philosophy in his youth (Hadot, 2008, 278) and throughout his life he kept the belief of philosophy as a metamorphosis between system of beliefs and existence in it. (Адо, 2005, 17) Guided by this belief he was skeptical towards the modern philosophy, because philosophy represents itself in the form of a technical jargon addressed to specialists. Professionals are training other professionals to be competent in theories, to understand the terminology and to comply with conventional standards of a given field, considering their established and self-preserved professionalism to be completely self-satisfactory.

In his works dedicated to ancient philosophy Hadot indicates that the discourse of ancient philosophy must be understood from a completely different position, where philosophy is primarily a way of life, however it is a way of life, which is closely linked to philosophical discourse. (Hadot, 2002, 4) For instance, in “Phaedo” Plato describes philosophy as an exercise of death. (Platons, 1997, 106) Plato understands death as the separation of the body and soul. In a philosophical sense the philosopher is trying to separate these two parts, thus liberating the soul, by shedding it from the passions linked to the corporal senses, in order to obtain the autonomy of the thought. Thus, for example, epicureans taught how to reach the pure joy of existence, but stoics – how to get rid of the disposition for things who do not depend on us, by becoming sharply aware of the tragic situation to which the human being is conditioned by fate.

With the domination of Christianity, and the separation of theology and philosophy, when philosophy became the servant of theology, obliged to provide the theoretical and conceptual material of theology, philosophy lost its original connection with life. Philosophy became a fully abstract discipline, but all the ancient spiritual exercises were integrated in the spiritual practices of Christianity. This problem was deepened by scholastic tradition of the middle ages and the formation of universities, when the education ceased to focus its attention to the development of human being, and reoriented itself to the formation of professionals. Such a tendency has been maintained until today. And despite the fact that outside the university in the time period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries in the persons of Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche and Leibniz, developed a genuinely creative philosophical activity and declared its autonomy from theology, it still remained to be a theoretical discourse. In

this period one theoretical discourse criticized another theoretical discourse. As Hadot points out, starting with the eighteenth century with rare exceptions (for example, Nietzsche or Schopenhauer) philosophy returns back to the university with such brilliant personalities as Wolff, Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. (Hadot, 2008, 271) By continuing this tradition, philosophy has kept its close relationship with the university until nowadays. Starting with the already mentioned Nietzsche, as well as Bergson and existentialism in general, philosophy starts to regain its primeval characteristic – to be a way of life (Hadot, 2008, 108), however, despite the efforts of some individual persons², philosophy has continued to position itself as a professional and not a existential discipline.

Conversion

With his philosophical efforts as well as with personal example³ Pierre Hadot stood for philosophy in its primeval constellation. Hadot writes: "Undoubtly a philosopher must be neither a professor nor a writer, but a person that has made a certain life-choice and accepted a certain way of life, for example, stoicism or epicurism." (Hadot, 1992, 92) In other words, philosophy is connected with some definite existential choice. As Hadot explains, being a philosopher in the ancient world automatically implicated a contradiction with the normal everyday life, the philosopher was behaving and seeing things differently than everyone around him (Hadot, 2008, 56) An interesting indicator of this situation are the ways in which philosophers were described by authors of comedies and satyrs. They described philosophers as weird and even dangerous persons. For instance, Platonists were considered to be supercilious, stoics – too harsh and rigorous people, and there were rumors that epicureans didn't eat anything, (Адо, 2004, 156) but Socrates was called *atopos*,

which means "unclassifiable" in the ancient Greek – i.e. something that can't be classified. According to the etymological meaning of the term *philo-sophia* (*love + wisdom*), Socrates was a lover of wisdom. By using the character of Diotima, in his work "Symposium", Plato describes wisdom as a perfection of knowledge which is available only to gods. (Platos, 1980, 90) Namely, in its perfection wisdom is something alien to the world of mortals. Socrates in his love for the things that are foreign to people becomes likewise foreign for mortals.

These few examples portray the gap in the lifestyle and opinions of the common people and the philosophers of the ancient world. This gap implicates that there has been a moment in which the philosopher has experienced some kind of a transformation, which has made him different from others. To name the process of fundamental changes in the personality of a human being, Hadot uses the concept of conversion.

Conversion (Latin *conversio*) stands for turning back, inversion, change of direction. Thus, this term is used to describe various kinds of changes, transformations and rearrangements. For Hadot this term refers to a transformation of the mental order – from a simple alteration of opinion to a complete change of personality. (Адо, 2005, 199) In the ancient Greece, the experience of conversion was mostly connected with the field of politics or law, in which opponents tried to win over each other for some position or truth by using various methods of rhetoric and persuasion. Less popular, but more radical was philosophical conversion. An initially philosophical conversion was connected with politics and expressed itself in the form of the belief – if we want to change a city, we need to change its people. Primarily such a belief was represented in a philosophical context by Plato in his work "The Republic". Philosopher is the one who can change the city, because he

is “turned” himself. (Platons, 1982, 125) Later this belief was adopted by schools of stoics, epicureans and neoplatonics, who used the notion of conversion not in context of city, but in a more individual sense. In a philosophical sense conversion meant the breakthrough or gap between common, acquainted, naturalistic fallacy of common sense and the truth what may be introduced by philosophy. (Адо, 2005, 210 – 211) Conversion meant the return to a true existence, to an essential, inner freedom, to a new and better perception of things. By developing and accepting some definite system of beliefs philosophical schools automatically considered living in relation with this doctrine. Accepting philosophical teaching meant both a way of life, and a conversion. On the one hand, philosophers lived their everyday life in accordance with a philosophical doctrine (Hadot even comes up with some odd and radical examples where, for instance, the stoics discussed such questions as – can a stoic philosopher sit cross-legged or which share of food may a stoic eat if he is having a meal with his father (Адо, 2004, 158)). On the other hand, philosophers worked hard on developing their personalities, in order to, for instance, in the case of the epicureans, achieve control of the passions and acquire a simple joy of existence, or in context of the stoics, to achieve steadiness in face of the strokes of fate. The effort in work of conversion of self was made with assistance of spiritual exercises.

Spiritual exercises

Understanding of the notion

Hadot defines spiritual exercises as an **effort in changing and transformation of the self**. (Адо, 2005, 343) In this constellation the notion of spiritual exercises is defined in its widest sense, including all the activities that the conversion contains – physical, intellectual, religious etc. Admittedly, Hadot talks about

psycho-physiological, sociological, religious and philosophical aspects of the conversion, but his main attention is paid to the spiritual exercises in a philosophical context, and for that reason, in case of the philosophy of Hadot we are talking about philosophical spiritual exercises.

By analyzing the term “spiritual exercises” the French philosopher admits that the word “spiritual” sounds outdated (Hadot, 2008, 81) to the contemporary reader. However, this word most precisely expresses idea of “spiritual exercises”. Such alternatives as “psychic”, “moral”, “ethical”, “intellectual”, “of thought”, “of the soul” do not cover all the aspects of the reality that must be described. Despite the fact that spiritual exercises are connected with intellectual and thinking activities, as well as contain certain ethical and moral aspects, these exercises change the system of beliefs of a person, as well as realize a metamorphosis of the personality. These processes do not include an involvement of separate potencies of a human being, but alternatively encompass the whole totality of his psychic world. In this context the term „spiritual” is used, because it reveals all the true dimensions of these exercises.

Focusing to the term “exercises” it must be said that it refers to the ancient Greek word “*askesis*”, but not in modern sense of this word as a restriction of food, clothing, property and sexual life. The ancient understanding of the word “askesis” is related to the inner activities of thought and will. Consequently by summing up meanings of both these components – “spiritual” and “exercises” – we come back to a slightly transformed definition of spiritual exercises which was given earlier. Namely, in this context spiritual exercises are intentional activities of human being that in the process of transformation of the self are directed to the whole totality of a human’s spirit.

*Practices of ancient
philosophical schools*

As mentioned above, ancient philosophy does not represent itself as a cluster of abstract theories or exegesis of texts, it occurs as way of life. Being a philosopher meant to be different from the society, by transforming your personality through spiritual exercises and coordinating everyday life by some form of a definite philosophical doctrine.

A systematic treatise that codifies the instructions and techniques of the spiritual exercises does not exist. It can be explained both with the loss of numerous texts and with fact that these exercises were closely connected with the oral part of philosophical practice. Due to the information given by Philo of Alexandria, Hadot is able to create an overall summary of the stoic philosophical therapeutics in the framework of this school. Spiritual exercises of the stoic philosophy contained exercises of attention, meditations and “remembrances of good things”, as well as intellectual exercises: reading, listening, research, and investigation, and finally some more active exercises: self-mastery, accomplishment of duties, and indifference to indifferent things. (Hadot, 2008, 84)

Attention is a fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude. It is a continuous vigilance and presence of mind, a self-consciousness that never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit. (Hadot, 2008, 84) Meditations and exercises of remembrance help to prepare for the unexpected, perhaps dramatic, incidents. By practicing these exercises, the philosopher becomes acquainted with poverty, suffering and death; he directly faces all of these misfortunes. Such exercises imply the control of the inner discourse of a human being, aspiring for an understanding of the distinction between good and evil within the framework of a philosophical doctrine, as well as the understanding of things

that are outside the human’s sphere of influence. Intellectual exercises were directed to the simple development of the intellectual capacity. Intellectual exercises such as reading, listening, research, and investigation were directed to the ability to get acquainted with the texts of philosophers and poets, and the understanding of ideas written in texts and spoken by teachers in lectures. Finally, we come to practical exercises, intended to create habits. By performing various social activities and duties, philosophers tried to acquire self-mastery, and get rid of the passions, hate, etc. In context of practical spiritual exercises Plutarch has written a large number of treatises, for example, “On Restraining Anger”, “On Peace of Mind”, “On the Love of Children”, “On Garrulity”, “On Envy and Hatred” etc. (Hadot, 2008, 86)

In ancient philosophy six main philosophical schools were represented – platonism, aristotelianism, cynicism, skepticism, epicureanism and stoicism. Each of these schools had an essential philosophical discourse, dogmas or principles that simultaneously were a framework for the practical life. Cynicism was a philosophical school that didn’t pay much attention to the development of a particular philosophical doctrine. In their practice they returned to the uncivilized nature, denying both the lifestyle of the common people, as well as the way of life that was practiced by other philosophical schools. As Hadot points out, Cynicism was generally considered a philosophy; but it was a philosophy in which the philosophical discourse was reduced to a minimum. (Hadot, 2002, 109). It was on the borderline of being a way of life without any philosophy, which means that all the philosophy of cynicism can be considered to be an exercise. All normal conveniences accessible to people, all products of civilization and conventions only soften the body and the mind. This is the reason

why the exercises of cynicism were an almost athletic, philosophically motivated training to endure hunger, thirst and foul weather, so that the individual could acquire freedom, independence, inner strength, relief from worries, and a peace of mind, so as to be able to adapt oneself to all possible circumstances. (Hadot, 2002, 110)

By focusing to skepticism and describing its way of life, Hadot uses the term conformism. The only principle of behavior for skeptics was conformity to the laws and ways of the city. (Адо, 2004, 158) They refused to deliberately affect the surrounding world in any way, thus acquiring inner peace.

Aristotelians represented the “theoretical” way of life. (Hadot, 2002, 80) Yet in the context of Aristotle we do not speak about “theoretical” as an opposite to practical. He uses word *theoretikos*, on one hand, to describe knowledge that is acquired only for itself, but on the other hand, it is related to a way of life which devotes life to such knowledge. Way of life of Aristotelians also can be called as a “life of mind”. Such a life is lived according to the mind, in order to find the philosophical happiness. In this sense the theory relates to the philosophy that is practiced and lived.

In context of the platonist way of life, Plato’s views of life and education in the Academy, which consider the acquirement of philosophy to be a lifelong process, must be recalled. (Hadot, 2002, 67) On the other hand, it is important to mention the spiritual exercises described by Plato in his works. For example in his “Seventh Letter” he talks about a choice of a way of life that consists of effort that must be implemented every day. (Platons, 1999, 218) In “Timaeus” Plato affirms that we must exercise the superior part of the soul – which is none other than the intellect – in such a way that it achieves harmony with the universe and is assimilated to the deity. (Hadot, 2002, 66) However, as Hadot points out,

most famous spiritual practice of Plato is exercise of death. (Hadot, 2002, 67) As it was mentioned earlier, death – it is separation between soul and the body. Philosopher with his effort tries to separate these two parts thus purifying and liberating him of scattering and confusion what is caused by body.

Lastly philosophy of Epicureanism can be considered as therapeutics what tried to bring back soul from worries of life to experience pleasure (simple joy of existing). (Hadot, 2008, 87) This was done, firstly, with meditations that helped to assimilate the dogmas of philosophy established by Epicurus, and secondly by practicing a discipline of desires by resigning from all that does not apply to the fundamental needs of basic necessity. They practiced exercises directed to relaxation, serenity and the art of that how to feel separate pleasures of body and pleasures of soul.

Unfortunately because of the laconism that is required here, we are forced to stay in the confines of short and succinct descriptions of the ideas represented by the ancient philosophical school. In order to answer the question about the motivation to join one or another separate philosophical school Hadot points out that by creating his own philosophy the founder of each school wanted to come up with some prescribed model of how to see the world and how to live in it, mostly woken as a reaction to other, unacceptable choices of life. (Адо 2004, 163) Though the choice of a philosophical school has never been a purely theoretical decision about some firm way of life, and personal motivation played its role by choosing one or other option of life. In other words, there has always been some mutual causal relationship between the theoretical contemplation and choice of life. Likewise theoretical reflection in philosophy has always forged ahead only because of some fundamental inner orientation of life.

Conclusion

Most of the researches and reflections made by Hadot were dedicated to the examination of the views and lifestyles of the ancient philosophers, and highlighted the close connection between philosophy and life in this period. But the question still remains – how was the philosophy of that time influenced by the existing cultural factors? Georgian philosopher Zaza Shatirishvili in his essay dedicated to the ancient philosophy and spiritual exercises draws attention to etymological meaning of ancient Greek word „skhole” and Latin „schola” (school) which means “free time”. (Шатиришвили, 2010, 100) Education meant free time from work, possibility to sit back and collect one’s thoughts. This leads us to the question – is the previously described model of ancient philosophy still actual today?

In the description of this problem Hadot points out that in today’s situation, an eclectic model of thought is characteristic to modern people. (Адо, 2004, 161). Namely, the contemporary human being might not accept, for instance, the teaching of stoicism or epicureanism in its whole, but he would accept some separate aspects from different schools. Nonetheless, in the context of spiritual exercises in general, Hadot points out that they do not relate to separate social structures or material conditions. They can be practiced in every age and are still in use. (Hadot, 2008, 282) In relation to this problem Hadot sums up: “Consequently, for me the model of the ancient philosophy is currently still important, which means that the search for wisdom is currently still important and possible.” (Адо, 2005, 352)

- ¹ Hadot points out that we do not know if Socrates used the word *philosophia* in his discussions with his interlocutors, but it is known that influenced by the personality and teachings of Socrates, Plato is the first one who gave permanent meaning to the word “philosopher”, and therefore also to the word “philosophy” in the *Symposium* (Hadot, 2002, 39).
- ² It is considered that French philosopher Michel Foucault renewed the interest in philosophy as an art of living in Western philosophy. Today his philosophy has drawn the attention of many bright authors from Germany, France, England, Latvia etc. (Kaiza, 2001, 36).
- ³ With her studies on philosophy of Pierre Hadot Latvian philosopher Anna Kande has accented a close connection between the life of the French philosopher and his philosophy (Kande, 2011, 41).

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Введение в философию Пьера Адо, или О духовных упражнениях

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В данной статье рассматриваются взгляды французского философа Пьера Адо. Особое внимание уделено ключевым концепциям его философии – конверсии и духовным упражнениям. Научные интересы Адо были сосредоточены на античной философии, ввиду чего он разработал инновационный метод для понимания философии этого периода. Адо отмечает, что, с его точки зрения, античная философия была прежде всего стилем жизни и поэтому должна пониматься как “духовные упражнения”. Данная концепция понимается как попытка изменить и трансформировать свое “я”, что в философии Адо называется конверсией.

Ключевые слова: Пьер Адо, духовные упражнения, конверсия, античная философия.
