

ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHY AS A FOUNDING MODEL OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY: PIERRE HADOT'S VISION OF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: *This paper discusses well-known French thinker Pierre Hadot's understanding of ancient Greek philosophy as a foundational model for Western philosophy. As the classical Platonic concept of Philosophia, philosophy in Greek antiquity was the love of wisdom, or a way of life aimed at cultivating oneself through spiritual exercises in search of wisdom, that is, the authenticity of human existence. Ancient Greek philosophers, therefore, functioned as mediators between wisdom and humans. From there, Hadot, as a true philosopher and a philosophical doxographer, opened a new perspective on studying the history of Western philosophy as the transformations of foundational models of ancient Greek philosophy and philosopher. Though interrupted for centuries, this long tradition has continued its influence across the Roman period, the Middle Ages, and modern times.*

Key words: *History of Philosophy, Ancient Greek Philosophy, Philosophy as a Way of Life, Spiritual Exercises, Pierre Hadot*

1. Introduction

Pierre Hadot (1922–2010) was a prominent French philosopher and historian of philosophy, widely recognized for his work on ancient philosophy (Davidson, 1990, p. 475). Born in Paris, Hadot pursued a Catholic education to become a priest. However, in 1952, at 30, he left the Church to become a researcher at the National Center of Scientific Research. In this position, he studied Latin patristics, philology, and philosophy. In 1963, he published his first monograph on ancient philosophy, *Plotinus or The Simplicity of Vision*. In the following year, 1964, he was appointed Director of Studies at the Fifth Section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Chase, 2013a, p. 1-2). From this point forward, Hadot concentrated his research on the philosophy of Western antiquity. In 1980, Hadot met Michel Foucault, then Professor of the History of Systems of Thought at the Collège de France and an enthusiastic reader of Hadot's work (Faustino & Telo,

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2024, p. 5). At Foucault's suggestion, Hadot was appointed Professor of the History of Greek and Roman Thought at the Collège de France in 1982, a position he held until his retirement in 1991.

Hadot's principal contribution to philosophy lay in his profound interpretation of ancient philosophy as a way of life rather than a purely theoretical endeavor (Davidson, 1997, p. 195-96). His most influential works, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1981) and *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (1995), translated into English in 1995 and 2002, investigated the essence of philosophy in antiquity (Faustino & Telo 2024, p. 3). According to Hadot, ancient Western philosophy began with ancient Greek philosophy as a way of life or that aimed at the radical transformation of the self (Hadot, 2023, p. xvii). Through his writings, as the author argues, Hadot presented ancient Greek philosophy as a foundational model of "a long tradition in Western philosophy" (Hadot, 2023, p. xvii) that has continued to resonate in Roman, Christian, and modern thoughts. Thus, this paper seeks to examine Pierre Hadot's interpretation of ancient Greek philosophy to shed light on his implicit vision of the history of Western philosophy.

2. The Models of Ancient Greek Philosophy and Philosopher

In 2002, in an article within a collection of French essays honoring Henry D. Thoreau, Hadot recalled the words of this American philosopher: "there are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers" (Hadot, 2005, p. 229). Hadot agreed with Thoreau's idea on the task, or, as Max Weber (2015) might conceptualize it, the *beruf* of philosophers, by continuing the citation from Thoreau: "to be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, [...] but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically" (Hadot, 2005, p. 229). From this, as Hadot claimed, Thoreau criticized the so-called modern philosophers who produce their ideas while simultaneously enjoying a comfortable life, or, to put it another way, who have separated their thinking and being. Therefore, Thoreau's famous living in the woods was to actualize his ideal about philosophy and philosopher. From there, as Hadot suggested, Thoreau unconsciously followed a profound Western philosophy model rooted in ancient philosophers (Hadot, 2005, p. 233). By returning to the starting point of this model, the author might reconstruct Hadot's interpretation of ancient Greek philosophy and philosophers, and his implicit vision of the history of Western philosophy.

Hadot did not regard ancient Greek philosophy as a notion taken for granted. The title of his well-known work, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, clarified this argument. This notion described a significant duration in Western philosophy and a united intellectual atmosphere. Before Plato's classic definition of *philosophia* in the fourth century BC, the first Greek philosophers had already appeared in the sixth century BC. They all shared a unified mental attitude: an effort to explain the world rationally (Hadot, 2004, p. 10). This action was theoretical and highly practical. Therefore, all Greek thinkers, including pre-Socratic philosophers, indeed, experienced a common conception of philosophy to a certain degree. Hadot systematized their shared idea of philosophy to construct his

notion of ancient Greek philosophy, which holds that “philosophy was a mode of life, and a technique of inner living. Philosophy did not change its essence throughout the entire course of its history in antiquity” (Hadot, 1995, p. 269). The ancient Greek philosophy, in short, was “a way of life” (Hadot, 1995, p. 269).

Hadot referred to the Stoics’ classification between philosophy and philosophical discourse to interpret the models of ancient Greek philosophy and philosopher. The Stoic philosophers considered the components of philosophy, which today have become subdisciplines of philosophy, such as logic, ethics, and metaphysics, as philosophical discourse. In contrast, philosophy is a unity between these parts (Hadot, 1995, p. 266-267). Philosophical discourse, which might lead to a rational understanding of the world, can be interpreted as the effect of philosophy itself as a way of life (Hadot, 2004: 3). An interpreter of Hadot, Machado (2024, p. 46) claimed that the notion of ancient Greek philosophy needs to be clarified. Not all possible manners of life can become philosophical. Hadot, in fact, never proposed such a vague notion. On the contrary, only certain specific modes of life can become philosophical. The criterion for distinguishing philosophy from other modes of life in ancient Greek society was the Platonic concept of *philosophia* as the love of wisdom. “Wisdom, then, was a way of life which brought peace of mind [...], inner freedom [...], and a cosmic consciousness” (Hadot, 1995, p. 265).

Humans, however, cannot complete the three goals above from the beginning. On the contrary, they require rigorous, persistent, and long-term training, which Hadot calls “spiritual exercises.” In his last monograph on Goethe, a true philosopher who pursued the ancient Greek philosophy model, Hadot (2023, p. xvii) argued that this activity does not necessarily have religious senses, which can refer to Sant Ignatius of Loyola (1987)’s practical guideline for authentic Catholic life, *Spiritual Exercise*. Sant Loyola’s masterpiece, in fact, as Hadot (1995, p. 82) wrote, was a Christian version of the ancient Greek philosophical tradition of spiritual exercise practice. Through this training, individuals attempt to transform themselves deeply. Spiritual exercise was, therefore, an essential activity in the ancient Greek world. Hadot (1995, p. 265) consistently discussed spiritual exercise as a path to actualize philosophy’s goal, wisdom: “Philosophy was a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual’s way of being.”

As Hadot (1995, p. 69) stated, living philosophically in ancient Greek society might be close to the crucial modern philosopher Martin Heidegger’s idea of the authenticity of human existence (Mansbach, 1991; Guignon, 2008). The Heideggerian authentic *Dasein* is “being-towards-death,” that is, a person, through everyday life activities, intensely conscious of the ontological limitation of themselves. This profound awareness is the existential understanding of oneself, from which one can cultivate oneself to transform and live an authentic life. Ancient Greek philosophy, therefore, is also “a training for death” (Hadot, 1995, p. 96). Concentrating on our death, indeed, was one of the essential components of spiritual exercises in ancient Greek society. Hadot, furthermore, claimed that there are four fundamental aspects of spiritual exercises in Greek antiquity’s philosophical schools: learning how to live, to dialogue, to read, and to die. These activities might define the Hadotian meaning of ancient Greek philosophers.

Most ancient Greek philosophers in the Hadotian sense entered these spiritual exercises by choosing a particular school, such as Plato's Academy or Aristotle's Lyceum, and voluntarily accepted the ethical and metaphysical doctrines those schools espoused. Ancient Greek philosophy, indeed, posited that authenticity in human existence faces significant impediments, primarily through the influence of passions that generate states of unauthenticity (Hadot 1995, p. 83). Different philosophical schools in Greek antiquity, therefore, placed philosophy as the "therapeutic of the passions" (Hadot 1995, p. 83) or the "healing of the soul" (Hadot 1995, p. 87), providing methodological practices to the search for the authentic living. Among these practices were attention, meditation, and memorization, the purpose of which was to allow the shift from an inauthentic mode of perception to the authentic perception of self and world. This procedure also involved other exercises, such as conversation, reading, and reflection upon mortality. These practices were exercises in effective communication, reading, and focused thinking on existential meaning in the present moment, leading to a comprehensive cosmic perspective. These philosophical practices culminate in "liberat[ing] ourselves from our worries, return into ourselves, and leave aside our search for subtlety and originality" (Hadot 1995, p. 109). Practitioners, through such philosophical practices, aimed for peace of mind, self-sufficiency and cosmic consciousness. Wisdom, in this way of thinking, made its sense to exist in this ultimate purpose.

Despite the Platonic definition of philosophers as "lovers of wisdom," the ancient Greek thinkers did not place themselves as sages who had achieved ultimate objectives (Hadot, 1995, p. 89). Instead, they functioned as perpetual learners and practitioners engaged in the lifelong pursuit of philosophical living. Socrates, who was, indeed, a critical ancient Greek philosopher, claimed that he had not reached the wisdom. Therefore, he repeatedly refused to identify himself as a sage. Despite having numerous pupils, he actively avoided the role of a philosophical teacher. As Hadot (1995, p. 151) pointed out, "Socrates refused to teach or be considered a master, it was because he had nothing to say or to communicate, for the excellent reason that, as he frequently proclaimed, he did not know anything." The intention toward the wisdom of Socrates, or broader, of ancient Greek philosophers, occurred in their daily lives among their fellow citizens. These philosophers carried a critical perspective toward customary or commonsense understandings of human existence and the world. For them, everyday life meanings that ordinary people acquired were profoundly false. According to different schools, philosophers rigorously refused to accept social norms. Thus, philosophers, from the perspective of their fellow citizens, were strange, bizarre, and isolated individuals (Hadot, 1995, p. 57). Hadot (2004, p. 36) further interpreted the unique position of ancient Greek philosophy by quoting Maurice Merleau-Ponty that philosophy is "never entirely within the world, yet never outside the world." This quotation means these philosophers, in turn, were neither entirely within nor outside the world. They, thus, were the mediator between wisdom and humans. From this position, they might disclose to other individuals the authenticity of their lives and the world (Hadot, 2004, p. 47).

The author, thus, suggests a summary of the Hadotian models of ancient Greek philosophy and philosopher from the above outline. Philosophy in ancient Greece was

the love of wisdom and a rigorous mode of being that demanded individuals' voluntary and radical transformation of themselves, according to different schools, to search for wisdom. Those who undertook this activity in the ancient Greek cities were philosophers who, as Hadot proposed, were mediators between wisdom and humans. They told other people about their actual lives and, at the same time, tried to convert themselves to live philosophically to present the authenticity of human existence. In difficult situations, philosophers needed to sacrifice their lives to defend the philosophy that they pursued. Socrates, the most influential figure, decided to die rather than abandon his commitment to live philosophically after being accused of corrupting the youth (Badiou, 2017, p. 2).

3. Hadot's Vision of History of Philosophy

In his inaugural lecture to the chair of History of Hellenistic and Roman Thought at the Collège de France in 1983, Hadot elaborated his interpretation of ancient Greek philosophy. He argued that these should not be regarded merely as a part of Western history of thought. Instead, as Hadot (1995, p. 67-68) suggested, they should be treated as “a *historical topic* that will study the evolution of the meaning of the topic, the models [...], and the role they have played in the formation of Western thought.” This statement reveals Hadot's ambition to revise the history of Western philosophy. “Ancient philosophy,” as the historian of philosophy Frede (2022, p. 139) wrote, indeed, “can be studied in many ways.” To clarify Hadot's contribution, the author argues that the broader question of how the history of philosophy can be studied should be considered.

Researchers and philosophers have approached the problems of the history of philosophy in various ways. According to the historian of philosophy, Popkin (1985, p. 625), philosophers, from ancient Greece to modern age, have viewed philosophy as something timeless and their own philosophies as eternal truths. “There is a very strong tendency among philosophers [...] to reject any historical study of the subject, to reject any historical interpretation, and to reject the historians of philosophy as part of the philosophical enterprise”. Immanuel Kant's perspective was close to Popkin's insight, suggesting that historians of philosophy merely document what philosophers have done. On the contrary, philosophy has been “draw[ed] from the fountain of reason itself” (Passmore, 1965, p. 1). However, if philosophy claims itself as absolute truth, how can one write a history of different philosophies? Faced with this dilemma, historians of philosophy might conceive of the entire history of thought as “self-consciousness in its progress through the ages elaborating constructions ever lighter and more audacious, resolving problems of balance and implication, inventing refinements of logic; and the more absolute the technical perfection, the more complete the internal coherence, the greater was the system in question” (Lévi-Strauss, 1961, p. 55). This perspective was close to Hegel's philosophy, which stated that philosophy's history is in its development (Hegel, 2009, p. 152), or more precisely, the history of humanity's thinking (Hegel, 2009, p. 261). Some historians of philosophy proposed a relative approach by concentrating on what they consider universal and timeless elements throughout the history of thought. Therefore, they did not consider a concrete philosophy but broke philosophies into stable elements throughout history. Understanding the history of philosophy can thus

be reduced to examining these elements (Skinner, 1969, p. 4-5). The debates on the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy have continued (Guerout, 1969).

In the ongoing discussion, Frede (2022, p. 172) proposes classifying three systematic approaches to the history of philosophy: i) philosophical doxography, ii) philosophical history of philosophy, and iii) historical history of philosophy. All three forms of studying the history of philosophy are authoritative (Frede, 2022, p. 44). Therefore, to evaluate Hadot's contribution to the history of philosophy, the author argues that we need to position him within these three approaches. According to Frede, the first two approaches are philosophical. Philosophical doxographers, whose roots in Western antiquity, view past philosophical thought through a philosophical lens, emphasizing its ongoing relevance to contemporary discussions (Frede, 2022, p. 26). The philosophical historians of philosophy interpret the evolution of philosophy as a selective and progressive unfolding of ideas (Frede, 2022, p. 40). By contrast, the historical historians of philosophy seek to understand philosophical works within their original historical contexts, focusing on how they developed rather than judging them by any philosophical criteria (Frede, 2022, p. 50).

Hadot's interpretation of ancient Greek philosophy, however, did not completely fit into one of Frede's three approaches to the history of philosophy. However, his work might be involved in all these approaches. Hadot (1995, p. 53) consistently emphasized the importance of objectively reconstructing what ancient Greek thought did, aiming "to reserve the right to follow this *philosophia* in its most varied manifestations and above all to eliminate the preconceptions the word philosophy may evoke in the modern mind." Following the method of his master Pierre Courcelle, Hadot (1995, p. 52) considered that a concrete philosophical work in Western antiquity needs to be understood according to its literary genre. In other words, he situated ideas in the past within their intellectual context. Hadot, thus, was a historical historian of philosophy according to Frede's classification. Labeling Hadot merely as a historical historian of philosophy, nevertheless, underestimates the richness of his contributions. In a conversation with two younger colleagues, Hadot identified himself first and foremost as a philosopher (Force, 2011, p. 30). His English translator and an Anglophone specialist of Hadotian thought, Arnold Davidson, recognized Hadot as a distinguished historian of philosophy and an excellent philosopher (Sharpe, 2018, p. 125). One of his current interpreters, Matthew Sharpe (2018, p. 125), even suggested describing Hadot by using a Foucauldian concept, "a masked philosopher." Through his nuanced and technical interpretations of ancient Greek philosophy and philosophers, Hadot presented his philosophy concealingly. Therefore, within Frede's category, Hadot could be seen as a philosophical doxographer and a philosophical historian of philosophy. The question, therefore, is: Which approach best characterizes Hadot's perspective on the history of philosophy? The author argued that Hadot should be considered a philosophical doxographer. This identification could value the Hadotian notion of "historical topics" above.

Hadot (1995, p. 68) suggested examining these historical topics by studying foundational models that have shaped Western thought. Thus, his vision of the history of philosophy was not chronological but as the transformations of these models, or

more precisely, of the models of ancient Greek philosophy and philosophers, in the course of history. After delivering his 1983 lecture, Hadot did not use “historical topics” or systematically pursue the research project on this notion in Western history of philosophy as other philosophers, such as Hegel, did. However, he continued to concentrate on ancient philosophy, particularly his model of ancient Greek philosophy and the figure of the philosopher, as a framework through which he regarded the history of Western philosophy. Hadot’s ideas through his works could not cover most events in the history of Western philosophy. Nonetheless, it opened a new perspective for investigating this intellectual tradition.

Indeed, Hadot, until his last days, considered the history of philosophy by its specific meaning of i) philosophy as a way of life and ii) philosophers as people who practice this particular mode of being. For instance, the *Meditations* of Emperor Marcus Aurelius could be read as a process of spiritual exercises (Hadot, 1998, p. 35). In the Middle Ages, Christianity adapted the ancient Greek concept of *philosophia*, reinterpreting it as “monasticism as the perfection of the Christian life” (Hadot, 2004, p. 247). Consequently, Catholic philosophers can be regarded as a Christian variation of the prototype of ancient Greek philosophers. The notable theological work of St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, which the author mentioned above, from Hadot’s vision, was a modification of the ancient Greek idea of philosophy as a way of life. The Hadotian scholar specializing in medieval intellectual history, Juliusz Domański, attempted to interpret Christian thinkers through the Hadotian model of ancient Greek philosophers. Erasmus asserted that the philosopher’s task is to “live philosophically,” (Domański, 2024, p. 102), which is close to the ancient prototype.

Nevertheless, according to Hadot (2024, p. xxvi), the Middle Ages witnessed a profound separation between being and thinking, that is, between “philosophical way of life (which from now on formed part of Christian spirituality) and philosophical discourse, which became a simple theoretical tool in the service of theology (*ancilla theologiae*).” The theological-philosophical discourse dominated scholastic universities until the 18th century. Philosophers who genuinely followed the ancient Greek prototype during this long duration - such as Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz - invented their philosophies outside these official academic institutions. Since the 18th century, as Schopenhauer (2014) despised, the rise of university philosophy began to replace the Hadotian model of philosophy as a way of life with philosophical discourse. Purely abstract, academic, and philosophical investigation, thus, replaced philosophy itself as spiritual exercises to achieve an authentic human existence (Hadot, 1995, p. 271). Since then, the meaning of true philosophy has gradually become strictly theoretical and systematic (Hadot, 2004, p. 261).

Today, to be recognized as a philosopher, one must write purely theoretical and systematic work and, at the same time, hold a position within a university philosophy department (Davidson & Lorenzini, 2023, p. x). Thus, Hadot’s agreement with Thoreau’s critique of the dominance of professional philosophers in the modern world, which the author mentioned above, became particularly valuable. Indeed, the knowledge produced by university philosophy did not guide us in how to associate with ourselves,

others, and the world in a meaningful way (Hadot, 1995, p. 274). Thus, the question of searching for authentic existence is neglected, too.

Despite his critique of the university philosophy model, Hadot remained a university philosopher. His best friend, Michel Foucault, was a university philosopher. Most of his philosopher colleagues have also worked at universities or academic institutions. Hadot acknowledged that any modern thinker attempting to follow the prototype of ancient Greek philosophy needs to confront this situation. Critical philosophers like Marx, Bergson, and Merleau-Ponty (whether successful or not in their academic careers) tried to pursue this prototype (Hadot, 2004, p. 270). He claimed that these models cannot disappear; they exist in different ways throughout the history of Western philosophy.

4. Conclusion

Hadot's insight into ancient Greek philosophy, indeed, provided an important commentary about the way that philosophy and its history should be understood. At the center of Hadot's interpretation is the awareness that ancient philosophy was not a wholly abstract or speculative activity; but rather, a lived experience, a way of life, situated in the demanding spiritual and ethical practices to transform the self.

However, his vision of the history of Western philosophy lacked plurality. Hadot reduces the diverse events of Western philosophy to their ancient Greek roots, grounded in his conception of "philosophy as a way of life." This concept excessively emphasised the will of unique individuals (Harte, 2024), that is, philosophers. Nevertheless, it did not have room for grace, or, in Jean-Luc Marion's (2016) concept, "givenness," which people might receive passively. The history of Western philosophy indeed offers many figures, most notably Saint Augustine, "the Doctor of Grace" (Taylor, 1950), whom Hadot could not easily fit into his model. Except for this fundamental critique, the Hadotian interpretation of the history of Western philosophy remains valuable today.

For Hadot, philosophers in ancient Greece, such as Socrates, Plato, and other unknowns, were practitioners who were searching for the authenticity of their existence. The ideal philosophers had peace of mind, inner freedom, and a cosmic consciousness. Through the framework of spiritual exercises, Hadot confirmed that ancient Greek philosophical schools functioned less as theoretical constructs and more as communities of existential training, where philosophy was inseparable from everyday life activities, existential awareness, and ethical orientation.

Furthermore, Pierre Hadot's interpretation presented a unique approach to studying Western philosophy's history. Being placed in the debates of how the history of philosophy should be produced, Hadot was displayed as a true historian of philosophy and a thinker. His notion of "historical topics" focuses on foundational and critical models of making Western thought across different epochs. He positioned the models of ancient Greek philosophy and philosophers in these prototypes. Therefore, the history of philosophy in the Hadotian sense can be reduced to the transformations of these foundational models. In doing so, Hadot placed himself at the intersection of Frede's classification of three forms of studying the history of philosophy. He was a historical

historian of philosophy who committed to contextual accuracy. As a philosophical historian of philosophy, Hadot saw ideas' continuity and development. The author, however, claims Hadot is a philosophical doxographer who pursues bringing past philosophies into dialogue with the present. This identification can most reasonably describe his vision of the history of philosophy.

Unfortunately, contemporary philosophical situation does not characterize itself as the Hadotian models of philosophy and philosopher, which were rooted in the ancient Greek world. Nevertheless, he believed that ancient Greek prototypes of philosophy and philosophers have returned to everyday life with Marx, Bergson, and existentialists, who can still tell others how to live their lives philosophically.

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