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The Notion of "Philosophy as a Way of Life": Ambiguities and Open Questions

Philosophy as a way of life (PWL) is an emerging field of study which in the last decades has experienced a vibrant and multifaceted development. Particularly prolific in the areas of metaphilosophy and the history of philosophy, PWL has also been applied to a wide variety of knowledge domains beyond the academic world. Ever more prominent in contemporary debates, PWL has become a banner under which a very diversified work is being developed by scholars with originally very different areas of research and expertise, who gather under PWL by their dissatisfac-

tion with what has become of philosophy (an abstract and purely theoretical undertaking) and their hopes about what philosophy can be (a way of thinking about and transforming one's life).

Despite the dynamic development of PWL and the wealth of literature it has inspired in recent years – or precisely because of it – there is still no consensus on what it precisely means. What exactly does this expression contain? What does it entail? To what extent is it clear and univocal? And how clear and univocal should it be?

The notion of PWL was forged and proposed by Pierre Hadot in an essay first published in 1984–85 with the title "Philosophie comme manière de vivre". It was translated into English as "Philosophy as a Way of Life" and Michael Chase's decision to use it as the title for the English translation of the collection of texts in which this essay is included was both illuminating and instrumental to make it well-known and popular in the Anglophone world. This essay contains indeed an important overview of some of the most important and influential aspects that Hadot associates to PWL throughout his work. First and foremost, Hadot uses the expression to describe how philosophy was understood in Antiquity. As he claims in this essay:

> During this period [the Hellenistic and Roman eras], philosophy was a way of life. This is not only to say that it was a specific type of moral conduct… Rather, it means 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.[1]

Hadot associates this goal with the pursuit of wisdom and makes it dependent on continuous spiritual progress and self-transformation, the main distinguishing marks of this conception of philosophy:

> Philosophy was a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual's way of being. Thus, philosophy was a way of life, both in its exercise and effort to achieve

1) Pierre Hadot, "Philosophy as a Way of Life," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Blackwell Publishers 1995), 265.

> wisdom, and in its goal, wisdom itself. For real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us "be" in a different way.[2]

Hadot describes wisdom as a state characterized by peace of mind, inner freedom, and cosmic consciousness and, for this reason, ancient philosophy was also conceived as deeply "therapeutic, intended to cure mankind's anguish."[3] The basis of this therapeutic self-transformation was the practice of a wide number of spiritual exercises, which enabled the translation of theory into lived practice. Borrowing the Stoic distinction between philosophical discourse and philosophy itself, Hadot defends the primacy of practice over mere theorizing, claiming that "philosophical theories are in the service of the philosophical life," which is itself a "unitary" and "continuous act, permanent and identical with life itself, which had to be renewed at each instant."[4]

Even though Hadot primarily associates this deeply existential, practical, and self-transformative conception of philosophy with ancient Western philosophy – which according to him would come to be deeply transformed during the Middle Ages and especially with the emergence of scholastic universities[5] – he also emphasizes a certain continuity of PWL through a "genuinely creative philosophical activity [that] would develop *outside* the university" in philosophers like Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, among others.[6] At the same time, Hadot also often notes how the same performative and self-transformative orientation is at the core of other philosophical or spiritual traditions, such as Hinduism, Daoism, or Buddhism.

From a historical point of view, PWL encompasses, thus, a very wide range of authors, traditions, and schools of thought which, despite their obvious heterogeneity, are united by the same practical, performative, and self-transformative orientation. Their main opponent is strictly theoretical and abstract philosophy, which Hadot

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2) Ibid., 265.

3) Ibid, 265–66.

4) Ibid, 267, 268.

5) This is a view he actually revised later on. For more on this, see the editorial for Part 1 of this two-issue thematic: "Academic Philosophy as a Way of Life," *Eidos. A Journal for the Philosophy of Culture* 8, no. 3 (2024): 1–10.

6) Hadot, "Philosophy as a Way of Life," 270–71. See also Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Belknap Press, 2002), 270.

associates with academic philosophy, to which PWL is often contrasted. According to Hadot, in the context of universities philosophy has lost its formative and transformative role and, as such, no longer changes the philosopher nor has an impact on their way of life, being reduced to the mere "construction of a technical jargon reserved for specialists."[7] In the work of Hadot, PWL functions, thus, not only as a hermeneutic tool to read ancient philosophy and other Western and non-Western authors with a similar metaphilosophical orientation, but also as a normative conception of philosophy that can be used to criticize and challenge current dominant models.

Following the threads opened up by Hadot's account, recent scholarship has developed work on these different fronts, discussing the very notion of PWL and its contrast with other possible ways of defining philosophy, reading different authors from the Western philosophical canon through the lens of PWL (including authors we would perhaps not associate with the notion of PWL), establishing an intercultural dialogue between different traditions of thought via PWL, using PWL to propose alternative pedagogical models, applying PWL to other non-academic fields of study, and bringing philosophy closer to wider audiences through a PWL approach.[8] Even though PWL is the umbrella term that gathers all these endeavors, it is not clear that all the scholars united in this movement work with the same understanding of the expression. Does the notion mean the same when applied to ancient philosophy and to contemporary authors? Can we speak of the same conception of philosophy when comparing traditions as different as ancient Western philosophy and Buddhism or Daoism? How exactly can PWL inspire new teaching strategies? Or what does it mean when applied to contemporary challenges and problems, such as feminism, global conflict, or ecology? What is distinct of PWL and which features of it remain in all these different approaches and uses of PWL?

One might, moreover, wonder why this particular expression has gained prominence in contemporary debates. PWL is indeed akin to other expressions that have been

7) Hadot, "Philosophy as a Way of Life," 272.

8) For an overview of contemporary uses and applications of PWL, see James M. Ambury, Tushar Irani and Kathleen Wallace, eds., *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Historical, Contemporary, and Pedagogical Perspectives* (Wiley, 2021); Matthew Sharpe, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: New Research Directions* (Brill, forthcoming); Marta Faustino and Hélder Telo, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

used to describe ancient philosophy and express a similar desire to rethink contemporary philosophy in light of ancient ways of thinking about and practicing philosophy. Several scholars, such as John Sellars, Christoph Horn, and Alexander Nehamas focus primarily on the notion of art of living, an expression that Hadot also frequently uses in his work.[9] While Sellars and Horn focus on Antiquity, Nehamas starts from Socrates and discusses how several thinkers throughout the history recovered it. Other scholars used different notions. Jan Patočka recovered Plato's notion of care for the soul, whereas Michel Foucault, inspired by Hadot and ancient thinkers, speaks instead of care of the self, although he also stresses the notion of art of living and coins the expression "aesthetics of existence."[10] Martha Nussbaum focused on the notion of therapy of desire and Peter Sloterdijk, more inspired by Nietzsche, speaks of a general ascetology.[11] Further authors and notions could be mentioned, and even though these notions are often taken to be somewhat equivalent, they stress different aspects and they often involve significant divergences regarding the way both the history of philosophy and the ideal form of philosophy are to be understood.[12] How similar is PWL to these alternative notions and how does it diverge from them? What is the specificity of PWL and why do many choose to use predominantly this notion? Is it a random choice or are there specific reasons that make it more appropriate to encompass the wide range of uses and applications that are associated with it in contemporary debate?

In fact, other authors have defined PWL in much more restrictive terms, using it in ways that significantly differ from Hadot and most scholarship working in his

9) See John Sellars, *Art of Living: The Stoics on the Nature and Function of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Bristol Classical Press, 2009); Christoph Horn, *Antike Lebenskunst: Glück und Moral von Sokrates bis zu den Neuplatonikern* (C.H. Beck, 2014); Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (University of California Press, 1998). On Hadot's use of the expression see, for example, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 83, 206, 272.

10) See Jan Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, trans. Petr Lom (Standford University Press, 2002) and Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, trans. Graham Burchell (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

11) See Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 1994) and Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Polity, 2013).

12) For instance, Annie Larivée provides an illuminating discussion of the differences between characterizing philosophy as an "art of living" and a "way of life." See Annie Larivée, "Ancient Philosophy as a Way of Life Examined: Clearing up the Confusion Between 'Way of Life' and 'Art of Life,'" in *Hadot and Foucault on Ancient Philosophy: Critical Assessments,* ed. Marta Faustino and Hélder Telo (Brill, 2024), 45–68.

wake. The most important of these is John Cooper.[13] Cooper's account is relevant not only because he presents an alternative way of reading ancient philosophies as ways of life, but also because he raises important criticisms to crucial aspects of Hadot's account. Even though he explicitly borrows the notion from Hadot, he speaks of ways of life in the plural, arguing that ancient philosophy was not as homogeneous as Hadot implies and that not all of the ancient philosophers were concerned with philosophy as a way life.[14] He provides a more strict and intellectualist understanding of the notion, according to which ancient philosophers developed sets "of argued through, rationally worked out, rationally grasped, and rationally defended, reasoned ideas about the world and one's own place within it" and assumed "a seamless connection between philosophical views, or in general philosophical convictions, about what is good and bad for a human being, and the actions – as well as the life made up of those actions of anyone who holds those views."[15] According to him, the notion of spiritual exercises has a religious connotation and is anachronistic. Moreover, the non-rational practices Hadot designates by this term played, in his view, no significant role for most ancient philosophers, whose training was mainly intellectual and had nothing to do with spirituality.[16] Finally, he sees this model as applying only to ancient philosophy, since posterior philosophy no longer shares the conceptual and philosophical framework that enabled philosophy to become a way of life – especially the assumption that human reason is "a power of motivation for action."[17]

Cooper's account raises important questions that are still being discussed today. Is spirituality a philosophical notion or is it necessarily restricted to the religious

13) See John Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton University Press, 2012); "Socrates and Philosophy as a Way of Life," in *Maieusis: Essays in Ancient Philosophy in Honour of Myles Burnyeat*, ed. Dominic Scott (Oxford University Press, 2007); and "Ancient Philosophies as Ways of Life," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values: Volume 32*, ed. Mark Matheson (University of Utah Press, 2013). See also Rogelio Miranda Vilchis, "The Place of Discourse in Philosophy as a Way of Life," *Metaphilosophy* 53, no. 4 (2022): 418–30; and Hélder Telo, "On the Role of Reason in Ancient Philosophical Practice: An Intellectualist Reframing of Hadot's and Foucault's Approach,'" in *Hadot and Foucault on Ancient Philosophy,* 205–29.

14) Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom,* 26.

15) Ibid., 15, 17.

16) Ibid., 20–22, 402.

17) Ibid., 11. See also 10–16.

domain? What is the nature of the spiritual exercises Hadot places at the core of ancient philosophy? Can all ancient philosophers be regarded as offering ways of life? Is it accurate to include modern and contemporary authors in the same tradition of thought? What kind of knowledge is involved in PWL? How does it see the relation between theory and practice (both in the sense of acting and the sense of exercising)? And how exactly shall the philosophical way of life be defined? Independently of Cooper's criticism, these are questions that require particular attention when discussing, using, or applying Hadot's notion of PWL.[18]

Scholars working in Hadot's wake have undertaken significant efforts to help define the notion of PWL in more precise metaphilosophical terms. In a 2017 article titled "What is Philosophy as a Way of Life?," John Sellars describes PWL 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 is often conceived as something therapeutic, but it need not be. It usually aims at a good life, but again this may not be necessarily so. It is transformative, though perhaps one ought not to assume that this will always be for the better. 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,

18) For different discussions of Cooper's criticism of Hadot's account, see Matthew Sharpe, "It's Not the Chrysippus You Read: Epictetus and Hadot Contra Cooper on Philosophy as a Way of Life," *Philosophy Today* 58, no. 3 (2014): 367–92; Matthew Sharpe, "What Place Discourse, What Role Rigorous Argumentation? Against the Standard Image of Hadot's Conception of Ancient Philosophy as a Way of Life," *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* (2016): 25–54; Stylianos Giamarelos, "Contemporary Pursuits of Philosophy as a Way of Life: Cooper, Hadot, Nehamas," *Proceedings of the XXIII World Congress of Philosophy* 12 (2018): 131–36; Marta Faustino, "Philosophy as a Way of Life Today: History, Criticism, and Apology," *Metaphilosophy*, no. 2–3 (2020): 357–74; Vilchis, "The Place of Discourse in Philosophy as a Way of Life"; Marta Faustino, "A Contamination of Philosophy by Religion? Reassessing Hadot's Notion of Spiritual Exercises,'" in *Hadot and Foucault on Ancient Philosophy,* 115–36; Telo, "On the Role of Reason in Ancient Philosophical Practice."

> the concepts and categories with which people think "must deeply affect their lives."[19]

Also important in the context of the definition of PWL is Matthew Sharpe and Michael Ure's 2021 book *Philosophy as a Way of Life: History, Dimensions, Directions*, whose introduction includes a meticulous discussion of the notion of PWL. Following Hadot more closely than the scholars previously mentioned, Sharpe and Ure recognize the difficulty of identifying what exactly qualifies as PWL. Instead of providing a definition, they list a set of ten features (what they call the Tennead) that philosophies within the PWL tradition generally possess, although their specific configurations vary: a reflection on pedagogy, intellectual exercises, spiritual exercises, internal divisions within a philosophy, an invitation to turn inwards, particular literary genres, metaphilosophical metaphors, models of wisdom and happiness, a critique of the non-philosophical life, and conceptions of the sage.[20] Even though Sharpe and Ure present these features side by side and recognize that not every occurrence of PWL possesses all of them, they consider the turning inwards "the founding premise for any conception of PWL, insofar as the latter maintains that philosophical discourse, through teaching and intellectual exercises, can change people's deep-set beliefs," which is the condition of possibility of "lasting ethical or spiritual transformation."[21]

Many other texts could be cited that use the notion of PWL and either focus on different aspects or present alternative definitions.[22] Despite all these seemingly

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19) John Sellars, "What is Philosophy as a Way of Life?," Parrhesia 28, (2017): 40–56, 41.

20) Matthew Sharpe and Michael Ure, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: History, Dimensions, Directions* (Bloomsbury, 2021), 13–19.

21) Ibid., 15, 19, 21.

22) Some of them strive to characterize or define the notion or the approach associated with it – see, for instance, Michael Chase, "Observations on Pierre Hadot's Conception of Philosophy as a Way of Life," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancients and Moderns – Essays in Honor of Pierre Hadot*, ed. Michael Chase, Stephen R. L. Clark, and Michael McGhee (Wiley Blackwell, 2013) and Stephen Grimm and Caleb Cohoe, "What is Philosophy as a Way of Life? Why Philosophy as a Way of Life?", *European Journal of Philosophy* 29, no. 1 (2021): 236–51. Many others use an implicit understanding of the notion – whether discussing particular authors in the history of philosophy or contemporary issues – without feeling the need to clarify its meaning.

similar efforts, the notion of PWL remains far from being clear or univocal, and if we are trying to think about the essence and limitations of PWL, how it relates to its alternatives, or its applications, we may well need a more definite notion, or at least a definition of its main features and distinguishing marks. It is not entirely clear whether this is possible or even desirable. Indeed, it may well be the case that what gives unifying power to this notion is its partial vagueness or openness, recognizing a pluralism that draws on a variety of heuristics, depending on the need and context. Perhaps the dynamism and fruitfulness of the PWL movement and its expansion is largely due to its ability provide such a plurality of heuristics on a few central themes. If so, vehement attempts at fully clarifying the notion may create too much division and do more harm than good. When attempting to describe PWL, we need to be aware of the difficulty of the task and accept that there might not even be a definitive definition of PWL. Indeed, we might well need to accept that in this context there is only a family resemblance in Wittgenstein's sense.[23]

Our main goal for this issue is neither to solve this question nor to provide yet another definition of PWL. Instead, we wish to call awareness of the ambiguity of the notion and the importance of further discussion on the topic. In contrasting different attempts of defining PWL and discussing some of the most controversial aspects associated with it, we hope to highlight significant divergences and polemical points, and foster discussion of this notion as it continues to expand its influence and impact in the academic world and beyond it.

We begin the thematic section of this second issue therefore in one of the foundational ambiguities of PWL: is Aristotle the founder of philosophy as a scholarly project of developing knowledge as an end itself, or rather an exemplar of a distinctive approach to PWL? In "Philosophy as a Way of Life in Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* I: A Matter of Life and Death," Fabio Serranito takes this difficult task head on, arguing that Aristotle is committed to PWL, but that his telos for philosophy, and the life it engenders, is better understood by contrast to the alternative modes of life (or living at all), available in the adverse and difficult circumstances of the world in which we find ourselves. Drawing on the lesser read *Eudemian Ethics*, we

23) See Marta Faustino, "Philosophy as a Way of Life in the Tension Field Between Metaphilosophy and the Historiography of Philosophy," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: New Research Directions*.

gain a deeper vision both for the tension, and the high stakes of navigating what it means to live a good life.

Marta Faustino expands on the tensions between theory and practice in the PWL tradition in "Do We Need to Choose Between Theory and Practice? On the Place of *Logos* and *Praxis* in Philosophy as a Way of Life." She explores three heuristics for conceptualizing these poles in PWL in the work of John Cooper, Miranda Vilchis, and Matthew Sharpe. She seeks to rectify simplifications of Hadot's own position and to make it explicit: theory and practice are both essential components of PWL, which reciprocally influence and reinforce each other. She concludes that while practice is the end goal of PWL, the philosophical life is a unitary act that requires a perfect combination of theory and practice.

This is not to say that all divides or tensions in PWL are surmountable. Perhaps there are certain orientations that are antithetical to PWL. In "To Know Is To Be – Wisdom in Philosophy as a Way of Life and its Implications for our Understanding of Knowledge," Lucas Nascimento Machado seeks to distinguish mere knowing from the formative being of what one knows. He sees the latter as at the heart of the PWL tradition. For him, the philosophical life must come before discourse in PWL.

Hélder Telo provides a contrasting view to Machado's in the essay that closes the thematic section: "Philosophical Dogmas or Questions? A Defense of Philosophical Questioning as a Way of Life." In his essay Telo compares a view of PWL as based on dogmata with one that sees the PWL tradition as primarily grounded in questioning and spiritual exercises that enact and excite that questioning. This breaks from a settled perspective and dogmatic orthodoxy. He poignantly argues for an approach to PWL 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.'"

Like in our previous issue, our Discussion Section also includes an essay that explores our thematic. Lucio Privitello, in "Approaching Empedocles through PWL Practices," provides a provocative approach to what it means to do PWL philological research on Pre-Socratic fragments, in this case of Empedocles. In the essay, he approaches Empedocles' fragments through an Adornoian aesthetics and as providing the potential for transformative spiritual exercise. Privitello's new translation and

ordering of the fragments reframes them "back to their continuing ways of coming back to life as *memento vivere*." We, in turn, are invited into this essay as a creative reading of the history of philosophy as a spiritual exercise.

The Forum Section begins with Illia Ilin's "(Non-)Paranoid Reading of Sigmund Freud and the Fear of Being Photographed: Corpus-Based Approach." This work provides a fascinating case study of Freud, and his understanding of reading as it relates to the image in photographic form. What does it mean to read in a paranoid or non-paranoid way about someone who may be paranoid? This text situates Feud's work in the context of fears of being photographed in early twentieth century Austria. It is followed by Charles S. Herman's essay "Dilthey, Nietzsche and the Two Faces of Culture." It compares Dilthey's and Nietzsche's approach to cultural tension and friction as either constructive and/or limiting. He puts this in context of his building scholarship on dignity and honor-based cultures. He shows there is much to recover in Dilthey (lesser known or appreciated than Nietzsche), for norms-based dignity that does not devolve into a cult of dignity or honor. We conclude this issue with the essay by Laurynas Peluritis, "Lithuanian Philosophy of Culture and the Concept of Integral Democracy." This essay provides a fascinating history of Lithuanian philosophy of culture. Philosophy of culture became dominant in Lithuania during the early twentieth century, and it provides us with the intriguing and needed concept of "integral democracy": "It calls for democratizing cultural, social, and economic spheres, emphasizing personal freedom of conscience and cultural autonomy for various communities and groups with a multilayered democracy rooted in cultural, economic, and social autonomy, advocating for protecting individual and communal freedoms from state overreach."

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