

The place of discourse in philosophy as a way of life

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Abstract

For ancient philosophers, philosophy was not only a theory about the big questions but also a way of life, yet it was not only a way of life but also a theory. Pierre Hadot showed the importance of philosophy as a way of life in antiquity. Moreover, he defended, as this paper demonstrates, the view that ancient philosophy was primarily a way of life and that philosophical discourse or theory played a secondary role. The paper argues against Hadot, taking the paradigmatic Socratic way of life as an illustration, that theory is as crucial for philosophy as practice is. Doing spiritual exercises and living in a particular way was very important for the ancients, but so were truth and understanding reality.

KEYWORDS

philosophical theory, philosophy as a way of life, Pierre Hadot, Socratic philosophy, spiritual exercises

1 | INTRODUCTION

Pierre Hadot is well known for his investigation of the nature of philosophy in Greco-Roman times and his identification of many of its distinctive properties. His work on the importance of philosophy for the life of human beings has been particularly relevant. This contrasts with the emphasis that current philosophers put on theory, or “discourse” construction, to use Hadot's term, apart from whether it is relevant for human life or not. These days, philosophy, especially analytic philosophy, conceives of itself as “the disciplined pursuit of objective knowledge, and thus resembling the natural sciences” (Rorty 1999). Its role in our lives is at most indirect—if one happens to be a professional philosopher—or virtually nonexistent—as it very likely is for most people.

The principles of philosophy are not what they were in the past, namely, the rules for living a flourishing life.¹ Today, one typically thinks of philosophy as a set of propositions describing

¹ There have of course been modern philosophers who viewed philosophy as a way of life. For example, Descartes, Montaigne, Spinoza, and Bergson, but such cases are the exceptions that prove the rule.

or explaining some aspect of reality (and in some cases reality as a whole, though rarely connected with the question of how to live a well-lived human life). Although philosophical theory can communicate something about how to lead our lives and how one should act, this element does not seem to be as critical as its theoretical virtues: internal coherence, explanatory power, simplicity, and so on. Rather than being a specific way to live our lives, philosophy has turned into a very abstract and general description of reality.

Contrary to the role that philosophy plays today, Hadot has convincingly argued that ancient philosophy—from Socrates to the Middle Ages—stressed the significance of living a good life (1995a; 1995b).² At that time, theory seemed to be just a way to justify the particular philosophical way of life one has chosen. “Philosophical discourse,” as Hadot usually refers to philosophical theory, is secondary (1995b, 212).

Undoubtedly, Hadot has shown the fundamental differences between ancient and contemporary philosophy. Yet he overestimates the living component and does not sufficiently appreciate the vital role of theory in philosophy. We need to recognize the equally, and perhaps primordially, relevant role and status of philosophical knowledge in the lives of philosophers. Living philosophically was crucial for the ancients, but so was the pursuit of truth and a deeper understanding of reality.

In what follows, I first introduce Hadot's basic ideas on philosophy as a way of life and the priority of practice over philosophical discourse, taking Socrates as a central figure (section 2). In section 3, I argue against Hadot's view that philosophical discourse plays a role that is less important than practice and then respond to Matthew Sharpe's interpretation of Hadot's position. I close the paper (section 4) by arguing for the equal significance of practice and discourse through the examination of the archetype of the philosopher and one of Hadot's chief models: Socrates.

2 | PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE IN HADOT'S WORK

Given that ancient philosophy embraces many different philosophical schools, philosophers, and complex twists of thought, notions like *philosophical discourse*, *theory*, *spiritual exercise*, and *way of life* are hard to define in Hadot's work. We might not be able to give a precise definition of each of these notions that fits well with all of ancient philosophy. It is difficult, for instance, to distinguish philosophical discourse from practice in Aristotelian contemplation. It is also difficult to tell whether all spiritual exercises are ways of life in themselves, or their chief function is preparatory, or both. Despite these and other difficulties, I find it safe to argue that Hadot is committed to the following two elemental claims. In ancient philosophy:

1. the philosophical way of life consisted both of philosophical discourse (theory) and of spiritual exercises (practice); and
2. philosophical discourse was secondary.

2.1 | Philosophy as practice and discourse

Consider claim 1. In the modern academic milieu, there is no doubt that theory is essential for philosophy. Philosophers reflect on, analyze, criticize, and construct theories from their armchairs, classrooms, and conference rooms. Their products are articles, books, and monographs. Even contemporary work in ethics is mainly concerned with the construction of a

² Some recent defenses of this interpretation are found in Cohoe and Grimm 2020; Del Nido 2018; Ding and Yu 2022; Faustino 2020; and Hidalgo 2020.

theory of what a good life would look like. The practice of this way of life is not as important as the theoretical system itself. Whether they favor utilitarian, deontological, or virtue ethics, ethicists are primarily interested in the coherence, the scope, and perhaps the truth of their theories.

What about ancient philosophy? Well, confirming claim 1 above, Hadot recognizes that even ancient philosophy “is, at the same time and indissolubly, a discourse and a way of life” (1995a, 4); philosophy “always swings between these two poles; the discourse and the choice concerning the way of life” (2001, 135).³ In ancient philosophy, practice was not an appendix of philosophical theory, as it might be of, for example, modern ethics. In Hadot's view, the ancient philosopher, “at least beginning with the sophists and Socrates, proposes to form men and transform souls” (2020d, 85). To the ancients, philosophy was more a way of life than a set of theoretical propositions (1995a, 3).⁴

Socrates has been the first and perhaps the most notable role model for the practitioners of philosophy as a way of life, as “the art of living” (Nehamas 1998, 7). He is, Hadot says, “the very archetype of the philosopher. If he showed that everyday life could accommodate philosophy, he also proved, very clearly, by his life and death, that there is radical opposition between the habitual life of men and the life of the philosopher” (2020b, 50). He was unceasingly discussing with his contemporaries themes of enormous importance for leading a good life: justice, wisdom, and virtue. Dialoguing itself was a way of life, a “spiritual exercise” (1995a, 6).⁵ In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates replies to his accusers: “I will not cease to practice philosophy” (29d), which means that he will not cease to engage in dialogue.

Let us get clear on what “spiritual exercises” are. Hadot asserted that they are a practice that leads to a metamorphosis of personality and a change of worldview (2008, 119; 1995b, 82). They are a series of exercises for getting a new perspective on life and getting rid of disorderly attachments that involve not only thought but also imagination and sensibility. Spiritual exercises are the product of the individual's “entire psychism,” and their goal is to bring about a transformation in the individual's mode of seeing and being (1995b, 83).⁶ Among the varied forms that they can adopt, we find the following: meditation, dialogue, attention, memory, reading, studying, and profound analysis. We practice attention (*prosoche*) when we avoid thinking about the past and the future and we instead focus on the present moment. To get rid of preoccupations, the Epicureans and the Stoics practiced attention to the present. They designed this practice to avoid the fear of death and attain tranquility of mind.

Other spiritual exercises are meditation (*melete*) and memorization (*mneme*). Meditation consists of considering the natural course of events from a universal perspective. The Stoics trained themselves to see the insignificance of ordinary endeavors from a cosmic perspective. They strove to see how daily phenomena (especially the events of our day-to-day life) fitted with the natural course of things, so that they were not disturbed by what they could not control. From that point of view, death did not seem so dreadful. The exercise of memorization was also a spiritual one. Its goal was to embed the relevant philosophical principles (such as the cosmic perspective and attention to the present moment) in the mind.

Spiritual exercises may have been practiced long ago, but it is the figure of Socrates, Hadot remarks, “that causes them to emerge into Western consciousness, for this figure was, and

³ But, as we will see below, Hadot stressed, on multiple occasions, the primacy of the philosophical way of life over its discourse.

⁴ John Sellars maintains a similar position (2009, chap. 2).

⁵ As Sharpe says, “Hadot's Socrates is the first, unsurpassable practitioner of philosophic dialogue conceived of as what Hadot calls a ‘spiritual exercise’” (2011).

⁶ As Arnold Davidson observes, these were “*exercises* because they were practical. ... The art of living demanded by philosophy was a lived exercise” (1995, 21).

has remained, the living call to awaken our moral consciousness” (1995b, 89). The spiritual exercise that is the Socratic dialogue conduces to inner progress thanks to the knowledge we obtain about ourselves, especially by knowing our ignorance. Dialogue guides us to the truth and the Good (1995b, 93).

Thus, for Socrates and many other ancient philosophers (like Plato and Aristotle), philosophy was more than philosophical discourse: it involved a practice (see Hadot 1995a, 90). It seemed that to philosophize no longer meant pursuit of knowledge or even know-how but self-questioning (Hadot 1995a, 29).

This accords with claim 1 above. It is true that “the philosophical way of life consisted of both philosophical discourse (theory) and spiritual exercises.” This point is reasonable, but Hadot advocated the stronger idea that, although discourse was still necessary, its importance was minor compared to that of practice.

2.2 | Philosophical discourse was secondary

For Hadot, these examples strongly suggest that practice surpassed discourse for the ancients (claim 2 above). Spiritual exercises prepare one for and are an essential element of the philosophical kind of life. The continuing practice of spiritual exercises, like the Socratic search for wisdom, is the core of the philosophical way of life itself. The principal goal of philosophy is to produce not a theory but an inner transformation that expresses itself through a new personality, a new level, and a new way of being.

The two elements that compose the ancient philosophical way of life are practice and discourse. The first is the key component. It is itself composed of choosing a way of life and doing spiritual exercises. The first component is a nondiscursive choice—a decision and an initiative (Hadot 1995a, 33)—that sets the path the beginner philosopher has to embark on. Hadot asserts that “one could say that *the essential element of philosophical life is, indeed, non-discursive*, to the extent that it represents a choice of life and a will to live in a particular way, with all the concrete consequences that this choice implies in everyday life” (2020c, 70; emphasis added). Philosophers reaffirm their choice of life at every moment and in each spiritual exercise they engage in. These exercises prepare us to think and behave according to the corresponding mode of life. They are not merely a preparatory step but the sustaining force that maintains the particular thoughts and actions advocated by a philosophical school. The second element is discourse. What is its function?

Hadot maintains that, contrary to the way we practice philosophy today, to the ancients philosophical discourse was not an end in itself (1995a, 106; 1995b, 23, 60). Its role was only to justify and support the practice of spiritual exercises, and therefore of a philosophical way of life (1995a, 3). Hadot goes even further and reduces discourse to a mere complement, an aid, a means to an end. Philosophical discourse “is only a means intended to lead a mode of life which is not different from philosophy itself” (2020b, 53; see also 2020c; 2020e). Discourse is a complement to teaching (2020d, 85). Presumably, the Platonic dialogue illustrates this because it is like the modern audio cassette and recording, “which function as an intermediary between two events: the recording and its replaying” (2020c, 57). The dialoguing philosopher does not aim “primarily to erect an edifice of concepts” so as to form his disciples through a discussion or a lecture (2020c, 57). This instrumental use extended into the Hellenistic period, where “theory is never considered an end in itself; it is clearly and decidedly put in the service of practice” (1995b, 60).

Therefore, ancient philosophy is mainly a form of life (Hadot 2020b, 49). Philosophers are persons living peculiar lifestyles that they have chosen independently of theory. The way of life determines discourse, but not vice versa.

Consequently, discursive knowledge and truth do not play a primary role either. Hadot remarks that the Platonic oral teachings were “intended, above all, to form the disciple to a certain *savoir faire*, a knowledge of how to debate and to speak which will allow the disciple to achieve a new orientation in their thinking, in the life of the city or in the world” (2020c, 58). Epicurean physics was “elaborated as a function of the Epicurean choice of life” (1995a, 119). And the Stoic dogmas were intended above all else to produce an effect in the disciple’s soul (1995a, 107). Coherence is also subordinated to spiritual effectiveness (1995b, 60).

Philosophical discourse is still an element of philosophical life, but it comes in only after one chooses a way of life. Hadot acknowledges that choosing a way of life is intimately linked to philosophical discourse, but discourse on its own is not sufficient (1995a, 4). It must be a practice. The most that philosophical discourse can aspire to is being a kind of practice itself. For Aristotle, theory is the activity of contemplating.⁷ But it is still a practice and an exercise of a certain way of life.⁸ The natural conclusion, Hadot points out, is that theory is a spiritual exercise in itself (1995b, 100).

What matters most are the spiritual exercises, as Hadot clearly states in this interpretation of the ancient schools: “As for philosophical theories: they were either placed explicitly in the service of spiritual practice, as was the case in Stoicism and Epicureanism, or else they were taken as the objects of intellectual exercises, that is, of a practice of the contemplative life which, in the last analysis, was itself nothing other than a spiritual exercise” (1995b, 104). Even the Socratic way of life does not seem to put a lot of weight on theory: “In the Socratic dialogue, the real question is less what is being talked about than who is doing the talking. ... The point was thus no [*sic*] so much to question the apparent knowledge we think we have, as to question *ourselves* and the values which guide our own lives” (1995a, 28). So, claim 2 above that I attribute to Hadot—that “philosophical discourse (theory) was secondary”—is also well supported.⁹

But claim 2 seems too strong. The philosophical way of life seems to imply a distinctive and critical kind of knowledge about our epistemic situation and what is truly valuable in life. Socrates recognized his ignorance, and the Stoics knew that the only good is the moral one. Although these forms of knowledge are not complex philosophical theories, they are theoretical views about humans and the world that constitute the philosophical way of life. If this is so, then the claim that discourse is secondary does not seem to be right. In the next section, I argue that philosophical theory is at least as important as practice.

3 | THE IMPORTANCE OF PHILOSOPHICAL THEORY

In this section, I argue that theory in philosophy is more important than Hadot suggests. We can appreciate the relevance of theoretical discourse pretty early in the role model for the subsequent generations of ancient philosophers: Socrates. But before this, I respond to Sharpe’s rejection of claim 2. Sharpe defends the view that the thesis that Hadot favors practice over discourse is a misinterpretation. But many passages of Hadot’s work show that he viewed “philosophical discourse as secondary” in ancient philosophy.

⁷ Hadot’s position faces the difficulty that Aristotle thought that philosophy was not an exercise but an activity, because, as Gerson says, “an activity is done for its own sake, whereas an exercise is purely instrumental” (1997, 420).

⁸ “Theoretical” refers, Hadot clarifies, to contemplation. It is not at odds with “practiced or lived philosophy, precisely because it is itself a lived practice, the exercise of a life, and an activity which produces the happiness both of God and men” (2020c, 72).

⁹ As an advocate of Hadot’s interpretation claims, “the ‘philosophy as a way of life’ model clearly privileges practice over theory: Philosophy is conceived not primarily as a theory or body of knowledge but as a practice, a way of being and existing in the world” (Faustino 2020, 362).

3.1 | Sharpe's interpretation of the Hadotian view

Sharpe has defended Hadot from what he considers “a misrepresentation of the place of discourse” in Hadot's work. John Madison Cooper (2012), Bernard Williams (1994), and Martha Nussbaum (1993) believe—in line with claim 2 above—that discourse plays a secondary role in Hadot's approach. They criticize the Hadotian view because it undermines discourse and reason in ancient philosophy.

Cooper's critique, for example, runs along the following lines: “Fascinating and even inspiring though I found Hadot's ideas, his understanding of ancient philosophy, and of in what way it *could* be a full and complete way of life for its adherents, seemed to me to omit virtually altogether the central and indispensable place in philosophy (in Greece and ever since) of rigorous analysis and reasoned argumentation” (2012, x). Contra Hadot, Cooper highlights the importance of discourse. He notes that rational argumentation of a school's fundamental principles, logical validity, coherence, and the pursuit of truth, are essential elements for living philosophically. Being a Stoic, Epicurean, or Socratic philosopher does not entail a particular existential option and choice; Stoics, Epicureans, or Socratics “result simply from coming to accept different ideas, all of them supported by philosophical reasoning in pursuit of the truth” (2012, 19). The only existential choice is the general one of living like a philosopher, which primarily implies responding to reason instead of authority, tradition, or non-epistemic cognitive states like imagination and sensibility.

The rational analysis of life would lead the individual to pursue truth and acquire knowledge (though not necessarily absolute), which would, in turn, “motivate” the person to make wise decisions and to act virtuously. In antiquity, Cooper contends, “philosophy was widely pursued as not just the best guide to life but as both the intellectual basis and the *motivating force* for the best human life” (2012, 2).¹⁰ As we will see in more detail below, Socrates indeed thought that having knowledge meant willing and doing virtuous actions and that, in Cooper's words, “living one's philosophy meant living on the basis of a philosophically grounded conception of justice, piety, temperance, and courage as fundamental goods for a human being” (2007, 40).

Sharpe opposes Cooper's interpretation. By his lights, Hadot's writings do not “commit him to downplaying, dismissing, distorting or denying ancient philosophers' discursive means and practices, or their systematic theoretical goals” (Sharpe 2016, 53).¹¹ In support of the reciprocal and equal importance of discourse and practice, Sharpe quotes in a footnote Hadot's claim that “the choice of life determines the discourse, and the discourse determines the choice of life by justifying it theoretically” (2016, 40). Sharpe interprets Hadot as advocating the modest view that discourse was not “a self-standing goal of philosophizing *per se*” and that philosophy as a way of life does not negate the significance of discourse; “everything remains in place” (2016, 47). Theoretical systematization served to transform feelings, thoughts, and behavior to the extent that the spiritual exercises of memorization prepared the mind to readily apply those principles.

The difficulty with this interpretation is that a substantive part of Hadot's approach brings philosophical discourse down to a level that is far from equivalent to that of practice. In *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* Hadot expresses an opinion entirely at odds with equally treating the choice of life and theory: “Philosophical discourse, then, originates in a choice of life and an existential option—not vice versa” (1995a, 3; see also 5 and 46). The inconsistencies that he found in ancient texts and his sympathies for Wittgenstein's notion of “form of life,” in his

¹⁰ Cooper goes so far as to claim that spiritual exercises are practices that have “at most a secondary and very derivative function in the philosophical life during the heyday of ancient philosophy” (2012, 22). That is, he defends the completely opposite opinion. Although I think that Cooper is on the right track, I do not defend his stronger claim here. It is enough to note that Cooper is right when he says that Hadot overestimates spiritual exercises and omits, or at least downplays, the role of reason.

¹¹ But Sharpe and Michael Ure, following Hadot, downplay the role of philosophical discourse (2021, 30).

Philosophical Investigations ([1953] 1999), convinced him that the main role of philosophical language was to put people into a style of life (see Hadot 1962). Practice supersedes discourse. Hadot insists that “the priority of the school was never to disseminate a theoretical, abstract knowledge, as we do in our modern universities. Above all else, it aimed to form the [disciples] minds in a method and a knowledge of how to speak and how to debate” (2020a, 35). A few paragraphs later, he continues stressing the priority of practice over discourse: “I should add to this that philosophical discourse is not exceeded solely by the decision to change one’s life, but also in certain entirely non-discursive philosophical experiences, whether of an amorous kind, as in Plato, contemplative, as in Aristotle, or unitive, as in Plotinus.”

Hadot also emphatically stresses on multiple occasions, as we saw above, the priority of practice over discourse insofar as the latter was a means, a complement, a way to justify the spiritual exercises, and ultimately the philosophical way of life itself. The knowledge that theory can provide us, though necessary, is just preparatory or justificatory.¹² In Hadot’s view, for the ancients philosophy was “above all” a mode of life (2020a, 36). It was a choice of life and the preparatory and continuing practice of spiritual exercises for living that life. Socrates is the role model for this. At least since the time of Socrates, Hadot states, the choice of life in antiquity is located at the beginning of philosophical activity (1995a, 3). That choice, Hadot continues, “determines the specific doctrine and the way this doctrine is taught.”

Another way in which Hadot purports to show that theory is secondary is by suggesting that it is not necessary to have a specific discourse to practice the same spiritual exercises, and therefore to live the corresponding philosophical way of life. He asserts that the “modern man can practice the spiritual exercises of antiquity, at the same time separating them from the philosophical or mythic discourse which came along with them. The same spiritual exercise can be justified by extremely diverse philosophical discourses” (1995b, 212). The exercises are the fundamental element. To illustrate, Hadot states that we do not need to believe in nature or in universal reason to practice the Stoic exercises, because practicing them means living according to reason (1995b, 212).

Furthermore, Hadot suggests that it is not even necessary to possess a discourse for living a philosophical life. He is agnostic about the possibility of gaining any knowledge about the ontology of reality by reason (see Wimberly 2009; Sharpe 2018). The existential attitudes, which are universal and fundamental, are the primordial element. From this perspective, “there is universal Stoicism, Epicureanism, Socratism, Pyrrhonism and Platonism, which are independent of the philosophical or mythical discourses that have claimed to definitely justify them” (Hadot 2020a, 41).¹³ Their instrumental value is more important than any theoretical weight they could bear. “It is precisely this plurality of ancient schools,” Hadot says, “that is precious. It allows us to compare the consequences of all the various possible fundamental attitudes of reason, and offers a privileged field for experimentation” (1995b, 273).

If this is right, philosophy is primarily a form of practice rather than a form of discourse or theory. Given that “philosophical theories are in the service of the philosophical life,” philosophical discourse plays a secondary role (Hadot 1995b, 267). Hadot’s point is not only that philosophical discourse and written argumentation are the whole or the key part of philosophy—as Sharpe maintains (2016, 39). Hadot accentuates the primacy of practice over theory, downplaying and dismissing the importance of discourse.

¹² Philosophical discourse, Hadot says, “of oneself with oneself and of oneself with others, will, of course, be needed to justify and communicate these spiritual exercises, to represent the fundamental existential attitude, but philosophy itself consists primarily in choosing and living the attitude” (1995b, 31).

¹³ Speaking about the Stoic spiritual exercises, Hadot writes that it is “not necessary, in order to practice these exercises, to believe in the Stoics’ nature or universal reason. Rather, as one practices them, one lives concretely according to reason” (1995b, 212).

3.2 | Socrates *knows* nothing

We saw that, for Hadot (1995a, 46), Socratic philosophy was more a practice than a discourse, more a mode of life than of wisdom. But it seems that for living a philosophical way of life like the paradigmatic Socratic one, the role of knowledge is more important than Hadot suggests. Philosophical theory appears to be at least as important as the way of life associated with it (the spiritual exercises and the existential attitude). Theory and the mode of life are not distinguishable in the way required for theory to play a minor role. More specifically, although philosophical theory might not be necessary for many kinds of philosophical lives, as Hadot claims, it is constitutive of the Socratic way of life.

To begin with, although Socrates denied knowing anything, he knew what was expressed by his famous saying “I only know that I know nothing.” Since this sentence describes the way determinate facts are (Socrates' epistemic situation), it can be considered a minimal theory or discourse that yields knowledge about his cognitive state.¹⁴ Broadly understood, it is a *philosophical discourse* about philosophers' epistemic state concerning the questions that they typically ask. And this Socratic knowledge proved to be indispensable for living the distinctive Socratic philosophical mode of life.¹⁵

If, as Hadot argues, the philosophical way of life is a conversion “which turns our entire life upside down” (1995b, 83), a new way of being (1995b, 127, 130, 265, 275), then it would not be possible to live the Socratic way of life without the corresponding discourse. We need to believe this discourse to enter the new state of being. If we never recognize our lack of knowledge, we will never convert to the Socratic way of life.

It is hard to tell whether Socrates knew something besides his lack of knowledge.¹⁶ He claimed, nevertheless, to know many more things that are indispensable to live a well-lived life. Among them, he knew that “no one goes willingly toward the bad or what he believes to be bad” (Plato, *Protagoras* 358c–d; see also Xenophon, *Memorabilia* [1994] III 9.5, IV 5.6). That is so because knowledge entails specific kinds of actions: virtuous ones.¹⁷ It implies that it is impossible to know what is and what is not the right thing to do and not do the right thing (Plato, *Protagoras* 352c), and implies too that wrongdoing comes from ignorance. Since knowledge requires belief, and belief requires believing what discourse or theory says (even if its content can be expressed in only one sentence, like the famous “I only know that I know nothing”), theory and practice are inseparable.

Let us be clear about the inseparable connection between discourse, or beliefs, and action. This *Socratic intellectualism* means that beliefs—especially knowledge (let us stick with its Platonic definition as justified true belief)—and actions are inseparable. We always act in the belief of having knowledge. When we behave in a particular way, we favor the belief we think is true and justified. For example, Socrates observes that a tyrant can do what he pleases without doing what he wants: “It is possible for a man who does in his city what he sees fit not ... to be doing what he wants” (Plato, *Gorgias* 468e; see also Plato, *Euthydemus* 280d). Lack of willpower is not the cause of a tyrant doing wrong things, it is his (false) belief that harming people (killing and exiling them) is a better option than not doing

¹⁴ This sentence functions as the mnemonic device that diverse ancient schools employed to concentrate the fundamental dogmas of Socratic philosophy into one saying (Hadot 1995a, 106–7), one basic rule that sustains and justifies the entire system (1995b, 86).

¹⁵ Even if one understands the act of knowing our ignorance as a kind of spiritual exercise, in the sense that it involves the “entire psychism.” Socratic knowledge is still very important. As Heda Segvic has argued, the Socratic wanting, which involves the will, “is mediated by a correct conception of the object of desire as the good or the right thing to do” (2006, 175).

¹⁶ We should not underestimate the value of this kind of knowledge, because it maintains an intrinsic connection with self-knowledge. Perhaps “knowing that one knows or does not know will be all one needs to know about oneself” (Rowe 2011, 207).

¹⁷ All translations from Plato are from *Plato: Complete Works* (1997), edited by Cooper and Hutchinson.

so. According to this explanation, the tyrant falsely believes that he knows harming others is a better option than not doing so.¹⁸

If unjustified false beliefs motivate action, so much more will true or justified true beliefs. Socrates thought that reason “is also, psychologically speaking, a power of motivation for action ... and those who possess this power are moved by it to obtain and make value-directed use of things that they recognize in their own thinking, for reasons that they give to themselves implicitly or explicitly, to be good for them” (Cooper 2012, 11). Action and knowledge, or at least beliefs, are inseparable. Indeed, one can even make the case that, as Cooper argues, “a great many of the alleged ‘spiritual exercises’ Hadot instances in his discussion of Hellenistic philosophy are no more than perfectly ordinary ways of getting oneself to understand the real meaning and implications of philosophical arguments and philosophical positions, to fix them in one’s mind and make oneself ready to apply them smoothly to situations of life as they may arise” (2012, 402).¹⁹ In the end, discourse and reason play an essential role for Socrates.

Someone might notice that there is a potential paradox lurking here. On the one hand, Socrates claims that he does not know, and, on the other, he shows signs of knowing a lot about ethical matters. How can this be so? My argument does not depend on surmounting this difficulty, but the solution appears to lie in a difference between knowledge of specific things and moral situations, on the one hand, and universal knowledge (a distinctive philosophical one), on the other. Universal knowledge is harder to acquire than the more mundane variety. Socrates possessed universal knowledge and only fragments of knowledge of specific things (see Bett 2011).

Hadot accepts this interpretation of Socratic intellectualism in the sense that action presupposes knowledge, but he understands knowledge not as “a series of propositions or an abstract theory, but the certainty of choice, decision, and initiative” (1995a, 33).²⁰ Dialogue is a kind of spiritual exercise that leads the interlocutors to “‘realize,’ in the strongest sense of the word, what the true good is and what true value is” (1995a, 34). But how could one realize “what the true good is and what true value is” without involving knowledge? Is it that having knowledge boils down to a mere decision? Hadot strips the notion of knowledge of its very essence: truth, justification, and holding a belief. But that is not the idea that Socrates and many ancient philosophers had about knowledge. Among other things, in Plato’s *Apology* Socrates claims to know that “it is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one’s superior, be he god or man” (29b–c). Therefore, insofar as it is a way of life, the Socratic dialogue presupposes knowledge, justified true belief. Without the knowledge that one does not know many things and without having *true beliefs*, it would not be a Socratic way of life, because it neither involves a specific Socratic existential attitude nor a Socratic mode of being.

The Hellenistic philosophers highly valued truth too. In *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* Hadot asserts that almost all Hellenistic schools define wisdom as “the perfect peace of mind” (1995a, 102). But immediately afterward, he points out that such a state needs philosophy to remedy “the quest for false pleasures” (Epicureans) and “false opinions” (Skeptics). What does “false” mean for those schools if they are only seeking peace of mind? Does it

¹⁸ As Parry (2019) notes, if someone commits a bad deed, it is because that person deems it good, and this error comes from ignorance.

¹⁹ And, “given the motivational force belonging to reason, once those who pursue philosophy have perfected their power of reason by coming to possess a reasoned, articulated philosophical understanding of, among other things, everything of value in a human life, they will be moved, simply by that knowledge, toward living in such a way as to realize in their life that correct scheme of values” (Cooper 2012, 12).

²⁰ Stoics like Epictetus were also Socratic intellectualists. Epictetus asked one of his disciples, “A person can’t think something to be of benefit to him, then, and yet not choose it?” and responded: “He can’t” (*Discourses* I 28.6).

only mean that they are detrimental to mental well-being? Hadot asserts on the same page that Hellenistic philosophers agreed with Socrates that humans are plunged into misery and evil because of their ignorance. How can a philosopher agree with Socrates that humans suffer and are evil because of their ignorance without admitting that the search for truth and the acquisition of some true judgments are as important as the therapeutic effects of their possession?²¹

Without the search for truth and its acquisition, Hadot's approach threatens to reduce philosophy to a mere therapeutic method akin to behavioral or cognitive therapy. A threat emerges for transforming philosophy into the “servant of therapy” (Banicki 2012; see Robertson 2010; Sorabji 1997). This empties philosophy of any theoretical significance beyond the force of its logical coherence.²² Yet Socrates always reminds his interlocutor that truth, or at least an approximation or certain fragments of it, is not only relevant but also decisive for getting rid of false opinions and pleasures.

3.3 | Practice without discourse?

One might object that although Socrates' interlocutors did not know their lack of knowledge, they still would have been doing spiritual exercises when dialoguing. We cannot call these preparatory exercises “spiritual exercises” (at least not in the sense of a way of life), because there is not any true belief in play. Further, the interlocutors would not achieve the desired state of recognizing their ignorance from dialoguing alone (like Alcibiades and Critias; see Xenophon, *Memorabilia* I). Therefore, practicing dialogue is not automatically a Socratic philosophical way of life. A musician, an artist, and a carpenter are not truly such if they do not practice what they know. Hadot has established the relevance of this point for philosophers, but one can do the same with theory: Practicing is not enough without a profound knowledge of the craft.

According to Xenophon's Socrates, one “who has learned how to be a physician, even if he is not practicing, is nevertheless a physician” (*Memorabilia* III 1.4). Similarly, “the one who does not understand is neither a general nor a doctor.” A physician who cures people but knows nothing about how to cure is not a true physician and is not living the life of one. By analogy, one can deduce that, for example, knowing what is good and what bad is essential for a Socratic way of life. An individual that acts rightly without the corresponding knowledge is not living the Socratic way of life. Poets, although they speak about the things that matter for living a Socratic way of life, “do not compose their poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers and prophets who also say many fine things without any understanding of what they say” (Plato, *Apology* 22c).

Of course, Socrates claims that “those who do not act correctly are neither wise nor moderate” (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* III 9.4), but this is consistent with the claim that both knowledge and spiritual exercises are crucial for living the Socratic way of life. Even Socrates' response to Hippias, when asked for the definition of justice, that “instead of speaking of it, I make it understood by my acts,” is consistent with attributing a determining value to both theory and practice.²³

One could argue that intellectualism is not true of many other ancient philosophies. I will not try to answer this question here, but it is still very likely that these philosophies are committed to recognizing the significance of the known or believed theory. It is reasonable to

²¹ Perhaps Epicurus is an exception, because he explicitly subordinates discourse to therapeutics in his “Letter to Pythocles” (1994).

²² Hadot does not praise philosophical discourse for revealing the structure of nature, the best form of government, or behavior; he praises it for the force and mnemonic efficacy that the logical coherence of discourse brings in (1995a, 107).

²³ This response is often quoted by Hadot to lessen the significance of philosophical discourse (1995a, 31; 1995b, 155; 1998).

suppose that the chief ancient schools held “that if philosophical ideas ... do not, in some way, inform one's thinking, then one is very likely to live very badly, and to do great damage to others” (Kraut 2006, 241).

Again, to achieve “peace of mind,” a state that Hadot identifies as the aim of all the ancient schools (1999, 65), the disciples had to believe what the theory states. Understanding the rational structure of the universe was essential for the Stoics. It was critical for the Epicureans to differentiate the kinds and relative values of pleasures. In both cases, philosophical reflection was necessary to attain peace of mind. Was it mere wishful thinking? Even if the diverse discourses are different and incompatible among them, one can still hold that there is some truth in their general claims guaranteeing that philosophers attain the desired peace of mind. Perhaps no ancient school has the whole truth, but this does nothing to preclude philosophical theory giving us different pieces or fragments of the truth (Wimberly 2009, 195). Truth is still important, and therefore we need to study and debate the discourses of the different ancient schools.

Consider another analogy. Take the case of a philosopher who is driven by the Cartesian evil genius to act as a carpenter but knows nothing about carpentry. He lacks knowledge and even beliefs about carpentry. Under the influence of the evil genius, he splits, saws, and carves wood for making doors, windows, staircases, and office furniture. He may experience the same feelings as a carpenter and acquire the reputation of one. But that is not enough. We will stop calling him a carpenter when we realize that his performance did not come out of his knowledge of the craft. He is not living the carpenter's way of life even if he does and feels everything a carpenter does and feels, because he does not know what he is doing. In the same way, it is very unlikely that we can give the label “philosopher” to a carpenter who acts and lives like a philosopher (reads, writes, and gives conferences on philosophical topics) but does not know anything about philosophy. So, it is reasonable to assume that knowledge, or at least approximately true and justified belief, is indispensable for living the philosophical way of life.

The Socratic way of life exemplifies this point. Just practicing dialogue without a comparable amount of understanding will not do. Dialogue must “lead towards *both* the refinement of belief *and* actions that spring from understanding one's role in the world” (Tarrant 2006, 255). Discourse affects practice, and vice versa. It is hasty to claim, as Hadot does, that we can be practicing spiritual exercises and “at the same time separating them from the philosophical or mythic discourse which came along with them” (1995b, 212). Searching for truth is essential for philosophy. Being a Socratic philosopher means being “the kind of man who listens to nothing ... but the argument that on reflection seems best” (Plato, *Crito* 46b).

Therefore, we have good reasons to believe that claim 2—that philosophical discourse was secondary in ancient philosophy—is false. Both philosophical theory and philosophical practice are strikingly important.

In support of the primacy of practice over theory, Hadot quotes Plutarch, but the quote actually supports the equal value of both theory and practice: “Most people imagine that philosophizing consists in lecturing from the heights of one's chair and running courses on texts. But what these people totally ignore is that the daily life in the City *is itself also* a philosophy which is revealed continuously and equally in works and actions” (Hadot 1995a, 38; 2020b, 49, 50; emphasis added). Plutarch did not claim that the works and actions displayed in everyday life are superior to lectures and texts. He only stated that action in everyday life “is itself also” a philosophy. Philosophy was essentially composed of theory and practice for the ancients. Living according to reason was important but not more than rationally knowing the world and our place in it.

4 | CONCLUSION

If my discussion of the place of philosophical theory and practice in Hadot's work is correct, then Hadot assigns a secondary role to discourse and reserves the chief role for practice. But

there are reasons to believe that philosophical theory is at least as important as practice—as illustrated by the Socratic way of life. I do not intend to claim that theory and practice were equally important for all ancient philosophies. Epicurus himself might be an exception. But other philosophers, like Socrates and Aristotle, valued the truthfulness of some of their essential principles beyond their instrumental use.

Further research is required to determine the view held by each of the ancient schools. We also need further clarification of numerous notions like *spiritual exercise*, *truth*, *philosophical discourse*, and *philosophical way of life* and the manifold relations between them in ancient philosophy and in its contemporary counterpart. Philosophy is more than a form to live a well-lived life. It is also a way to know what we know, what we do not know, and how we must act according to that knowledge.

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