

Academic Philosophy: A Way of Life?

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Summary: This paper evaluates Pierre Hadot's concept of 'philosophy as a way of life' (PWL) as a tool to critique academic philosophy. Firstly, I will provide a concise overview of Hadot's critique through a discussion of two lesser-known texts. I will go on to submit that PWL, contrary to what its name might imply, does not primarily distinguish between philosophical theory and practice. Through an exploration of relevant secondary sources, I will emphasize PWL's focus on the spiritual dimension of philosophy, or rather the lack thereof in the modern research university. A return to philosophy as a way of life does not imply emancipation from the university as such but rather from contemporary academia's research practices and standards. Only then can philosophy rekindle its true essence, namely transforming the lives and worlds of many.

Undoubtedly, the current state of academic philosophy is most revealingly demonstrated by the fact that no academic philosopher calls themselves an academic philosopher. The reason behind it is known to us all: academic philosophy has become increasingly associated with producing excessively theoretical papers that do not make tangible contributions to philosophical discussions, let alone impact the lives of those beyond the academic realm. The relentless pursuit of citations has paradoxically led to increasing amounts of philosophical papers that are never cited and, quite possibly, never even read.¹ It seems indicative of

¹ The debate about the actual numbers remains ongoing, see Eric Schwitzgebel, 'How Often Are Philosophy Articles Actually Cited? Encouraging News', *The Splintered Mind*, 20 October 2022 <<https://schwitzsplinters.blogspot.com/2022/10/how-often-are-philosophy-articles.html>> [accessed 19 July 2023].

the way many people feel about contemporary academic philosophy: that it has ceased to be of any genuine meaning.

At the same time, this prevailing sentiment seems somewhat misplaced. Over the past decades, the most prolific philosophers emerged from an academic background, and the institution of the (medieval) university has played a pivotal role in safeguarding the vulnerable philosophical discipline throughout European history. It is hard to deny that the present-day 'trendiness' and democratization of philosophy,² fostered by a general yearning for meaning and an earnest desire for authentic living, owe much of their existence to the institutional support that the university continues to provide to the discipline.

The growing critique of academic philosophy therefore calls for a careful reassessment of the complex and ancient symbiosis of philosophy and academia. Their intricate relationship indicates that any comprehensive critique of academic philosophy must go beyond easy dismissals of scholastic exegesis, fetishized jargon, and dry linguistic analyses. Only then can we gain a deeper understanding of the position

² In the Netherlands, this trendiness and democratization can be seen in the increasing number of students enrolled in philosophy programmes at universities (+30% over the past five years), an increase in the number of philosophy books sold (+25% over the past five years), and the flourishing of popular philosophy institutes such as Alain de Botton's School of Life, see Jonasz Dekkers, 'In een chaotische wereld vinden mensen nu houvast in filosofie', *NRC*, 10 August 2023 <<https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2023/08/10/in-een-chaotische-wereld-vinden-mensen-houvast-in-filosofie-a4171654>> [accessed 23 September 2023]. Rising student numbers have also been observed in Canada and the United States, see Ian Coutts, 'Is Philosophy Having a Moment?', *University Affairs*, 16 January 2021 <<https://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/is-philosophy-having-a-moment/>> [accessed 23 September 2023]; Sarah Fullerton, 'Defying Negative Stereotypes, Humanities Majors Are Booming at UC Berkeley', *University of California*, 4 November 2022 <<https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/defying-negative-stereotypes-humanities-majors-are-booming-uc-berkeley>> [accessed 23 September 2023].

of academic philosophy in the modern world and carefully evaluate its impact, or lack thereof, on the accessibility and relevance of popular philosophy.

This paper points to Pierre Hadot's concept of 'philosophy as a way of life' (PWL) as a starting point to delve into the symbiotic relationship of philosophy and academia. Hadot famously uses PWL to capture the way philosophy was practiced in Greco-Roman antiquity, namely as 'a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual's way of being'.³ He describes how ancient philosophy concerned itself with the art of living the good life, involving concrete practices in which one's entire being was engaged.⁴ As this essay unfolds, it will become clear that the concept of PWL offers a nuanced perspective from which to critique academic philosophy. Whilst PWL expresses disapproval of (overly) scholastic approaches to philosophy, it simultaneously acknowledges that philosophy has in fact always taken place within institutional frameworks.

My claim is that the concept of PWL serves as a valuable tool to identify the central issue with academic philosophy: its neglect of the inherently spiritual dimension of philosophy. Instead of merely focusing on the perceived overemphasis on theoretical aspects, I contend that philosophy as a transformative practice necessitates *both* practical engagement *and* theoretical discourse. My argument begins with an exposition of Hadot's critique of academic philosophy in two lesser-known texts. In the subsequent section, I expand upon Hadot's critique through an analysis of secondary literature, which, as I reveal, often prioritizes the practical over the spiritual and, in doing so, overlooks the

³ Pierre Hadot, 'Philosophy as a Way of Life', in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. by Arnold I. Davidson, trans. by Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 264–76 (p. 265).

⁴ See Pierre Hadot, 'Spiritual Exercises', in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 81–125 (pp. 82 ff.).

essence of Hadot's critique. The third section turns to the modern research university and shows why this type of university impedes a return to teaching and studying philosophy as a way of life.

I. Hadot's critique of academic philosophy

Pierre Hadot (1922–2010), a prominent historian of ancient philosophy, is mainly remembered for introducing the concept of 'philosophy as a way of life'. He developed this concept to understand the incoherence frequently encountered in ancient philosophical texts.⁵ While other interpreters often smooth out these inconsistencies to create coherent philosophical systems, Hadot took a different approach. His argument was that the very incoherence evident in the writings of ancient philosophers was a natural outcome of the essence of ancient philosophy: a way of life aimed at radical transformation.

Nonetheless, Hadot's concept of PWL serves a dual purpose. It not only offers a descriptive reconstruction of an ancient past but also functions as a normative tool explicitly designed to expose the deficiencies of 'doing' philosophy academically. Therefore, as Marta Faustino aptly notes, Hadot's criticism of academic philosophy has been 'consistent and harsh throughout his work'.⁶ However, despite this overarching theme, the precise contours of Hadot's criticism of academic philosophy remain far from clear, due to the various ways in which he articulates it across different texts. In this section, I look at two of them, both of which explicitly delve into the critique of academic philosophy: Hadot's talk at the University of Paris Nanterre in 2006 titled 'Enseignement antique et enseignement moderne de la

⁵ See Pierre Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, trans. by Marc Djaballah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 59.

⁶ Marta Faustino, 'Philosophy as a Way of Life Today', *Metaphilosophy*, 51.2–3 (2020), 357–74 (pp. 365–66).

philosophie', and his 2007 interview by Arnold I. Davidson published as 'L'enseignement des antiques, l'enseignement des modernes'.

I start, however, by recalling that Hadot's criticism of the university is not a rejection of organized philosophical schooling *as such*. Quite the contrary: Hadot always emphasized the pedagogical nature of philosophy and its inherent tendency, from the ancient Greeks onwards, to institutionalize.⁷ One could even argue that Hadot's central theme throughout his work is that ancient philosophy cannot be understood separately from the institutional framework in which it took place. Nevertheless, Hadot makes a distinction between two modes of institutionalized philosophical education. I refer to these as 'the school' and 'the university' (or 'academia').

The classical philosophical schools that Hadot describes, for example, the Platonic Academy or the Aristotelean Lyceum, were communities that epitomized the flourishing of philosophy as a way of life. In these schools, students mainly practiced *dialectica*, a structured dialogue according to precise rules, and listened to lectures that explored specific questions, followed by lively discussions afterwards. For students and teachers alike, philosophical discussion was more than a theoretical exercise: it was a praxis that engaged one's entire being. Hadot underscores how this oral practice made up the essence of philosophy in the ancient and medieval world. Accordingly, he interprets ancient philosophical texts, even the theoretical treatises of Aristotle, through the lens of their broader pedagogical aim: the radical transformation of one's self and world.⁸

⁷ See Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. by Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 57.

⁸ See Pierre Hadot, 'Enseignement antique et enseignement moderne de la philosophie', in *La Philosophie comme éducation des adultes: textes, perspectives, entretiens* (Paris: Vrin, 2019), pp. 149–75 (pp. 156–57); Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, pp. 52–54; Hadot, 'Enseignement antique', pp.

This transformation of one's way of seeing and being holds great importance for Hadot's understanding of philosophy, as we shall see. But what exactly does this transformation entail? Transforming our world involves shifting from a first-person perspective to a comprehensive cosmic outlook, where we acknowledge nature's indifference to our individual self and 'accept [the world] in its entirety, as willed by fate'.⁹ This disinterested cosmic vision, Hadot underlines, requires a 'going beyond oneself', recognizing oneself as part of the whole, and therefore inherently contains a universalist dimension.¹⁰ The transformation of one's being, in turn, aims at 'peace of mind (*ataraxía*) and inner freedom (*autarkeia*)'.¹¹ It is an elevation of one's self and therefore constitutes both a loss and a gain: 'One might say that the highest point the self can attain is the point at which one has the impression of losing oneself in something that totally overcomes one.'¹² For Hadot, the transformation of one's world and of one's self were always intertwined in the philosophical way of life.

This is not to say, Hadot adds, that every philosophical school in ancient Athens pursued this transformation. Just as philosophers coexisted alongside sophists, philosophical schools that practiced philosophy as a way of life always appeared beside institutions where philosophy was merely lectured, not 'lived'. Hadot infers this from the historical fact that ancient philosophers were known to denounce the academic 'professors' who only concerned themselves with 'discourse'

156–57; Hadot, 'Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy', in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 49–70 (pp. 61–63).

⁹ Hadot, 'Spiritual Exercises', p. 83.

¹⁰ Hadot, 'Reflections on the Idea of the "Cultivation of the Self"', in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 206–14 (p. 211).

¹¹ Hadot, 'Philosophy as a Way of Life', p. 265.

¹² Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, p. 84.

and overlooked the transformative essence of philosophy as a way of life.¹³

The tension between the school and the academy reflects the dichotomy between the philosopher and the sophist, which pervades the entirety of Hadot's work. In this regard, he speaks of two poles of philosophy: 'one might say that there have always been two opposed conceptions of philosophy, one puts the emphasis on the pole of discourse, the other, on the pole of choice of life.'¹⁴ Given the fact that Socrates epitomized the ancient understanding of what it meant to be a philosopher, it is no surprise, Hadot writes, that Socrates continued to serve throughout antiquity as the antithesis of the (mere) philosophy professor.¹⁵

How did this difference materialize in ancient philosophical education? Hadot mentions two notable aspects of the ancient philosophical schools: 'on the one hand, communal life with the teacher [*maître*], on the other hand, the practice of a certain mode of life that distinguishes the philosopher from the non-philosopher.'¹⁶ The first point, communal life, should be taken quite literally: the disciples of the philosophical school would share a house with their teacher or build huts around it to be as close to him as possible. These were the so-called fervent followers (*zelotai*), who, along with their teacher, would actively practice philosophy as a way of life. Next to the zealots, however, there was also the 'simple audience', to use Hadot's words. This audience consisted of listeners who came to enjoy classes that were open to the public, free of charge. Unlike the diehards, their motivation was to

¹³ See Hadot, 'Enseignement antique', p. 149.

¹⁴ Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, p. 60.

¹⁵ See Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, p. 36; Pierre Hadot, 'The Figure of Socrates', in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 147–78; Hadot, 'Enseignement antique', p. 151.

¹⁶ Hadot, 'Enseignement antique', p. 150 [my translation].

acquire philosophical skills that could prove beneficial for their political or administrative careers. Their interest in philosophy, in short, stemmed primarily from the pursuit of personal gain.¹⁷

This distinction increases in significance as the ancient philosophical school gives way to the (medieval) university in the 11th century. Hadot argues that the primary objective of the university is for students to pass exams, aiming at securing comfortable societal positions: ‘for the medieval or modern student, it’s about passing exams, with a lucrative aim.’¹⁸ In the medieval era, this lucrative aim materialized by being admitted into the more prestigious faculty of theology, after which a profitable career in the church or the theological faculty awaited. Philosophy became the handmaiden of theology and was therefore primarily taught as a set of (onto)logical and dialectical skills that prepared for theological studies. According to Hadot, academic philosophy continued to have its utility, as it assisted individuals in achieving personal ambitions. However, when considered in isolation, it fell short of embodying true philosophy, as it did not strive for philosophy’s highest aim, ‘the destiny of man’, wisdom.¹⁹

Scholasticism, which has always been the method of academic philosophy *par excellence*, is then merely a byproduct of the university’s functional aspirations. It enquires into ‘the systematic unity of the philosophical construction’²⁰ instead of grappling with life’s bigger questions. Using the scholastic method, academic philosophy tends to concern itself more with nitty-gritty distinctions than with the ultimate

¹⁷ See Hadot, ‘Enseignement antique’, pp. 154–60.

¹⁸ Pierre Hadot, ‘L’enseignement des antiques, l’enseignement des modernes’, in *La philosophie comme éducation des adultes*, pp. 305–22 (p. 309) [my translation].

¹⁹ Pierre Hadot, ‘La philosophie comme éducation des adultes’, in *La philosophie comme éducation des adultes*, pp. 179–88 (p. 185) [my translation].

²⁰ Hadot, ‘Enseignement antique’, pp. 167–68 [my translation].

ends of existence.²¹ One can think of how the modern philosophy student is not required to *live* the philosophy of, say, Nietzsche or Heidegger but rather to catch it in a net of conceptual clarification and systematic interpretation.

Hadot traces the roots of the scholastic method to the rise of the Roman empire, when philosophy started to be practiced throughout the Mediterranean. This expansion led to the dissemination of Greek philosophical treatises, sparking a surge in questions about their precise meaning. As a consequence, philosophical education shifted its focus from addressing specific questions or theses to dedicating itself primarily to the exegesis of foundational texts.²² Moreover, the increased student numbers resulted in such large classes that the intimate community life, as it had existed in the ancient schools, became practically impossible.²³

Consequently, the link between philosophical texts as explorations of particular problems and their small-scale audience in specific contexts, which according to Hadot was essential for practicing philosophy as a way of life, broke down. Philosophy gradually shifted to being taught in public, for-profit, state-sanctioned academies by 'professional' philosophers skilled in navigating texts and concepts. Philosophy became an affair of state, with imperial academies studying philosophy as mere *historia*, without engaging in the philosophical way of life. The focus was on training professional philosophers pursuing academic careers or putting their knowledge to financial use in other ways. That is why, according to Hadot, these institutions failed to produce any notable philosopher that we still know of today.²⁴

²¹ See Hadot, 'La philosophie comme éducation des adultes', p. 185.

²² See Hadot, 'Enseignement antique', pp. 160–62.

²³ See Hadot, 'L'enseignement des antiques', p. 307.

²⁴ See Hadot, 'Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse', pp. 62–64; Hadot, 'L'enseignement des antiques', p. 311; the only possible exception, mentioned by Hadot, to the absence of notable philosophers in the late Roman period is Alexander of Aphrodisias, see Hadot, 'Enseignement antique', p. 163.

Throughout his critique, Hadot voices the opinion that philosophy and its education should always be disinterested: 'Philosophy does not teach people a particular craft, it does not prepare them for a particular profession, but it seeks to transform their sensitivity, their character, their way of looking at the world or their relation with others.'²⁵ As I already pointed out above, Hadot identifies this transformative process, which he also calls 'conversion', as the essence of philosophy, rather than the pursuit of theoretical knowledge. He emphasizes the distinction between merely *informing* students and genuinely *forming* them. The method of the latter, the formation or conversion, is embodied in the famous spiritual exercises he describes in his article of the same name. These include exercises of attention (*prosoché*), memorization (*mnéme*), or meditation (*meléte*).²⁶

To end this section, let me summarize the distinction Hadot makes between the ancient school and the medieval/modern university. On the one side, there is the university: the public institutionalization of sophistry, where students pay to attend lectures on textual exegesis and pass exams to become professional philosophers, in search of material gains. On the other side, we find the ancient schools of philosophy: private communities where one's way of life consists of freely discussing concrete philosophical questions in pursuit of wisdom and practicing spiritual exercises aimed at the total transformation of one's self and world.

²⁵ Hadot, 'La philosophie comme éducation des adultes', p. 180 [my translation].

²⁶ See Hadot, 'Conversion', in *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot: Philosophy As Practice*, trans. by Matthew Sharpe and Federico Testa (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), pp. 83–91 (pp. 89–90); Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, p. 73; Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, p. 91; Hadot, 'Spiritual Exercises', p. 85.

II. Academic philosophy between theory and practice

Although I promised in the introduction that Hadot's concept of PWL would enable a nuanced critique of academic philosophy, one cannot ignore how the previous section relied heavily on oppositional binaries. I will therefore begin this section by underscoring two ways in which Hadot relativizes his concept of PWL. This will allow us to examine the potential of the modern research university to revive philosophy as a way of life in section III.

Hadot seems to be aware that his interpretation of ancient philosophical schools leans towards romanticism and his portrayal of academia veers towards caricature. He therefore adds nuance to his critique in two ways. Firstly, Hadot acknowledges that the academic way of practicing philosophy (or what in hindsight could be designated as such) dates back to the origins of philosophy itself. He emphasizes that there have always been philosophers who were only interested in philosophical discourse and not in philosophy as a way of life.²⁷ In doing so, Hadot challenges the perception that academic philosophy is a recent phenomenon or parasitical departure from the philosophical tradition.

Secondly, Hadot points out that numerous philosophers in the 19th and 20th centuries, in their critique of university philosophy, again succeeded in 'converting' their readers to the philosophical way of life through their works. He specifically mentions Bergson, Nietzsche, and 20th century phenomenologists like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.²⁸ This observation underscores the enduring presence of philosophy as a way of life. It never truly disappeared but instead continued to thrive and exert influence through thinkers who sought to catalyse a spiritual transformation amongst their readership.

²⁷ See Hadot, 'L'enseignement des antiques', pp. 308–09.

²⁸ See Hadot, 'Enseignement antique', p. 175.

Both points underscore that Hadot's advocacy for philosophy as a way of life should not be interpreted as a nostalgic or reactionary call to return to a mythical past when philosophy was still pure and uncorrupted. As Hadot himself remarked, we should instead understand his concern for the Greeks merely as a detour, a means of communication, to make his more fundamental point.²⁹ That is why, as Faustino pointed out above, Hadot's *prima facie* descriptive claims about ancient philosophy never truly hide their underlying normativity. This makes it all the more strange, it seems, that Hadot never explored at length the possibilities of practicing philosophy as a way of life in the modern age.

It is therefore unsurprising that the central question that plagues interpreters of Hadot's work concerns the feasibility of philosophy as a way of life in the contemporary world. Hadot himself seemed ambivalent. On the one hand, he warned that attempting to replicate the way the Greeks 'lived' philosophy in contemporary education risks rendering PWL artificial. On the other hand, Hadot occasionally displayed a more optimistic outlook, noting that the spiritual exercises practiced in ancient philosophy, such as attention or meditation, remain viable and can be undertaken individually even today.³⁰ How could he not, after pointing to Bergson and Nietzsche time and again as modern examples of PWL practitioners? Nevertheless, Hadot's ideas on the matter never really concretized. It is therefore necessary to turn to secondary literature.

Michael Chase, the most important translator of Hadot's work into English, argues that, according to Hadot, practicing philosophy as a way of life is still possible 'if we are willing to separate the wheat from the

²⁹ See Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, pp. 147–48.

³⁰ See Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, p. 56; Hadot, 'L'enseignement des antiques', pp. 315–18.

chaff'.³¹ What Hadot means by this, Chase explains, is that we should understand the ancient philosophical systems as superstructures built upon a handful of elemental insights and their accompanying spiritual exercises. In fact, the theoretical considerations of each school are 'secondary and nonessential accretions to a fundamental insight'.³² This seems in line with Hadot's assertion that the number of philosophical positions that can be taken is limited,³³ meaning repetition of old practices is less of a vice to be avoided than a necessary imperative for practicing philosophy. I will return to this point and contrast it with the scholarly objectives of the modern research university.

Chase goes on to describe his own experiences with both the analytic and the continental tradition. He observes how analytic philosophers apply 'sophisticated philosophical reasoning [...] for the purpose of not doing anything at all, or rather for the justification of continuing to live precisely the way one is living now'.³⁴ Chase notes how the embarrassment of analytic philosophers vis-à-vis the modern sciences leads them to strive for the abolition of philosophy in general.³⁵ At continental philosophical departments, Chase observes a radical determinism and relativism that could only result in 'fatalistic quietism and acceptance of the status quo'.³⁶ He is appalled by the shameless indulgence of extravagant jargon, which he suspects is often used to mask the utter banality of continental philosophical claims. He concludes: 'Neither seemed able to speak to my thirst for the honest,

³¹ 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. by Stephen R. L. Clark, Michael McGhee, and Michael Chase (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), pp. 262–86 (p. 263).

³² Chase, 'Observations', p. 263.

³³ See Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, p. 69.

³⁴ Chase, 'Observations', p. 269.

³⁵ Chase, 'Observations', p. 272.

³⁶ Chase, 'Observations', p. 274.

jargon-free discussions of philosophical issues that genuinely mattered to my life.³⁷

Disappointed by both philosophical traditions and their lack of care for practical life, Chase sees Hadot's idea of philosophy as a way of life as a possible third way to escape the aporias of the major philosophical discourses of 20th century philosophy:

Unlike analytic philosophy, [philosophy as a way of life] does not shun the Big Questions in an attempt to appear scientific, but deals with issues that interest and affect the lives of people everywhere, both within and outside the Academy. It does not, of course, propose a readymade list of answers in a dogmatic fashion, but it gives people access to a wide variety of solutions that ancient philosophers have proposed, as models and guides for further reflection. Yet since Hadot's conception of philosophy is anchored in the philologically based study of Greek and Latin literature and the historical comprehension of ancient thought within its context, it is free from the arbitrariness, superficiality, and subjectivity of much New Age thought. Since it tries to express itself in clear, jargon-free language, it avoids the hermeticism of Continental thought and the impenetrable forests of logico-mathematical symbols favored by many Analyticians. Yet if it is unconcerned with being fashionably scientific, it also lacks an interest in coinciding with the typical features of many Continental philosophers. It is neither skeptical, ironic, nor relativistic, but upholds the values of social concern and action in defense of justice, as well as the importance of transcending our limited, individualistic viewpoint in the direction of universality.³⁸

In this paragraph, Chase eloquently captures the aspects of philosophy as a way of life that appeal to many, precisely as it contrasts with academic philosophy. However, in doing so, Chase forgets that Hadot regards central thinkers in the continental tradition, such as the highly jargony Heidegger, as having practiced philosophy as a way of life. More importantly, however, Chase clearly values *practical* over

³⁷ Chase, 'Observations', p. 275.

³⁸ Chase, 'Observations', p. 280.

theoretical philosophy. He approvingly describes the rise of philosophical counselling groups, which practice Socratic dialogue for therapeutic aims, as an instance of the de-professionalization of philosophy.³⁹

Similarly, Faustino agrees that Hadot values philosophy's 'deep practical, existential, and transformative dimension' over the 'mere theoretical, abstract, and logical discipline, as seems to have become the rule in most contemporary universities'.⁴⁰ She lists three similarities between modern (for example, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard) and ancient practitioners of philosophy as a way of life:

- i. the valorization of practice (actions, behavior) over theory (theses, books) and the consistency between the two;
- ii. the performative character of their writings and their aim to promote self-transformation;
- iii. a concern to provide guidance for one's life on the basis of an ideal of human flourishing or perfection.⁴¹

Although the last two points are undoubtedly valid, I find it harder to agree with the first point. It seems to me that reading Hadot's position as valuing the practical over the theoretical contradicts his idea, reiterated many times, that philosophical theory and practice are as incommensurable as they are inseparable: 'There is no discourse which deserves to be called philosophical if it is separated from the philosophical life, and there is no philosophical life unless it is directly linked to philosophical discourse.'⁴² This is because 'the philosopher, who himself practices philosophy, cannot act upon himself and others

³⁹ See Chase, 'Observations', pp. 281–82.

⁴⁰ Faustino, 'Philosophy as a Way of Life Today', p. 365.

⁴¹ See Faustino, 'Philosophy as a Way of Life Today', p. 370.

⁴² Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, p. 174.

except through discourse. Philosophy is, therefore, a way of life which brings with it, integrally, a certain mode of discourse.⁴³

The risk of interpreting Hadot as privileging practice over theory is that one reduces him to an ordinary ‘practice what you preach’ advocate, where theory is but a means to a certain practice. Let us, for instance, take Javier Hidalgo’s interpretation. He correctly observes how Hadot deems a philosophical way of life to be an indispensable complement to philosophical reasoning, identifying spiritual exercises as the key method to achieve this aim.⁴⁴ But for Hidalgo, it seems this merely means using theoretical philosophical insights to inform our practical lives.⁴⁵ He gives Peter Singer’s decision to become a vegetarian as an example of someone who let himself be convinced by his own arguments on animal suffering.

I am not saying that Hadot would object to philosophers living up to their own philosophical conclusions. What I am saying, however, is that Hidalgo’s interpretation fails to understand that philosophy as a way of life does not separate theory and practice: they are *one and the same*. Against Chase, Faustino, and Hidalgo, I maintain that Hadot does not favor practice over theory but instead invites us to interpret philosophical theorizing *itself* as a sort of practice.

My reading is supported by both John Sellars and Matt Sharpe. Sellars refers to Lucretius’ assertion that ‘a good life is impossible without a mind purged by reason, which only philosophy can deliver’.⁴⁶ Sellars contends that true philosophy does not choose between theory

⁴³ Pierre Hadot, ‘Ancient Philosophy: An Ethics or a Practice?’, in *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot*, pp. 54–73 (p. 64).

⁴⁴ Javier Hidalgo, ‘Why Practice Philosophy as a Way of Life?’, *Metaphilosophy*, 51.2–3 (2020), 411–31 (p. 421).

⁴⁵ Hidalgo, ‘Why Practice Philosophy as a Way of Life?’, p. 417.

⁴⁶ John Sellars, ‘What Is Philosophy as a Way of Life?’, *Parrhesia*, 28 (2017), 40–56 (p. 52).

and practice but is in a constant back-and-forth between the two.⁴⁷ Sellars claims that ‘perhaps it does not matter so much whether we start out in the pursuit of truth or with a desire for a transformed life, for if we do our philosophy well we shall always end up with both’.⁴⁸ Sharpe concurs and points out, against what he refers to as the ‘standard image of Hadot’, that

Hadot does go to some length to guard his readers against supposing that his idea of ancient philosophy speaks against rational philosophical argumentation. Hadot’s point is just that philosophical discourse and more or less formal, often-written argumentation cannot claim to be the whole of which it was always only ever the key part.⁴⁹

Even writing systematic philosophical treatises, a favorite target of Hadot’s polemic,⁵⁰ can qualify as spiritual exercises, as Sharpe correctly points out.⁵¹ One could say that both Sharpe and Sellars view Hadot as deconstructing the theory/practice binary that is often read into his work, by making the point that philosophical theorizing can *itself* be a form of practice. To quote Hadot once more: ‘my main preoccupation has been precisely to show that what was considered to be pure *theory*, abstraction, was *practice* in both its mode of exposition and its finality.’⁵²

For this reason, Miranda Vilchis’ critique of Sharpe does not hold. Miranda Vilchis argues that, for Hadot, philosophical discourse

⁴⁷ See Sellars, ‘What Is Philosophy as a Way of Life?’, p. 48. This is a position shared by Tom Stern, see his ‘Complications of Philosophy’, *The Point Magazine*, 10 (2015) <<https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/complications-of-philosophy/>> [accessed 14 July 2023].

⁴⁸ Sellars, ‘What Is Philosophy as a Way of Life?’, p. 53.

⁴⁹ Matt 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, Special Volume: Self-Cultivation* (2016), 25–54 (p. 39).

⁵⁰ See Hadot, ‘La philosophie comme éducation des adultes’, pp. 184–85.

⁵¹ See Sharpe, ‘What Place Discourse’, p. 42.

⁵² Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, p. 88.

originated in the choice of life, not the other way around, and that ‘the knowledge that theory can provide us, though necessary, is just preparatory or justificatory’.⁵³ Although this quote might be used against Hidalgo’s ‘practice what you preach’ interpretation of Hadot, I do not see how this undermines Sharpe’s position, as Sharpe’s point is precisely that, as a necessary preparation for philosophical practice, the discourse of philosophy cannot be separated from its practical dimensions. This, however, does not mean that theory is merely secondary to practice. Therefore, rather than characterizing Hadot’s position as ‘downplaying and dismissing the importance of discourse’,⁵⁴ I agree with Sharpe that philosophical discourse constitutes the ‘key part’ of philosophy as a way of life.⁵⁵

This means that Hadot’s critique of academic philosophy cannot be (primarily) directed against the theoretical nature of academic philosophy. After all, discussions on logic and epistemology featured just as prominently in ancient schools as they do in the modern university. The only difference is that in these schools, logic and epistemology were a ‘lived’ enterprise.⁵⁶ But what does that mean? For Hadot, philosophy as a lived practice entails spiritual training in disinterestedness, aimed at a radical transformation of one’s self and world. I therefore submit that Hadot’s critique of academic philosophy is above all targeted at the modern university’s relinquishment of its spiritual calling. This calling is irreconcilable with the pursuit of worldly matters and profits described in the first section. For this reason, Hadot underlines the great importance of universality in philosophy education: ‘One could say [...] that educating oneself, becoming adult, is

⁵³ Rogelio Miranda Vilchis, ‘The Place of Discourse in Philosophy as a Way of Life’, *Metaphilosophy*, 53.4 (2022), 418–30 (p. 424).

⁵⁴ Miranda Vilchis, ‘The Place of Discourse’, p. 424.

⁵⁵ Sharpe, ‘What Place Discourse’, p. 39.

⁵⁶ Hadot, ‘Ancient Philosophy: An Ethics or a Practice?’, p. 66.

“universalizing oneself”, sometimes placing oneself in the place of others, but, perhaps also, restituting oneself in the universe.⁵⁷

The secondary literature will likely remain divided over what constitutes the core of Hadot’s argument. Although most scholars, including Miranda Vilchis, observe that Hadot deems the spiritual exercises to be the most fundamental dimension of philosophy,⁵⁸ it remains debatable whether these exercises should be placed on the theoretical/practical-axis (as *spiritual exercises*) or rather on the spiritual/material-axis (as *spiritual exercises*). I have argued for the latter option. Hadot’s suspicion of systematic and/or exclusively theoretical philosophy should be viewed from his deeper denunciation of academic philosophy as a means for personal gain. Philosophy is not about winning, it is about losing, mainly yourself. This raises the question of how to (re)incorporate, if at all, the spiritual dimension into contemporary philosophical education.

III. Towards a new spiritual philosophy

Before suspicions arise that I am advocating a return to religious practices, let me briefly point to Hadot’s understanding of the word ‘spiritual’. As already stated, Hadot defines spiritual exercises as ‘voluntary, personal practices meant to bring about a transformation of the individual, a transformation of the self’.⁵⁹ Hadot is aware that his use of the adjective ‘spiritual’ is less than ideal. However, he thinks that alternative substitutes (‘exercises of thought’, ‘ethical exercises’, ‘intellectual exercises’, and some such) do not acknowledge that one’s

⁵⁷ Hadot, ‘La philosophie comme éducation des adultes’, p. 188 [my translation].

⁵⁸ Miranda Vilchis, ‘The Place of Discourse’, p. 424. See also Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, p. 88: ‘In fact, all philosophy is an exercise – instructional discourse no less than the inner discourse that orients our actions.’

⁵⁹ Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, p. 87.

entire being is engaged in the exercise. He furthermore denies that the term 'spiritual exercise' necessarily has a religious connotation, pointing to Paul Rabbow's work *Seelenführung*, in which Rabbow claims that Ignatius of Loyola's *Exercitia Spiritualia* stand in a much older tradition of spiritual exercises that goes back to ancient times.⁶⁰

Hence, I propose to interpret the adjective 'spiritual', as I have (implicitly) done in the first two sections, in contradistinction to the adjective 'material'. This choice stems from the fact that, particularly in Hadot's discussions of academic philosophy, he presents spirituality as the opposite of the pursuit of philosophy for material gains. Hadot's advocacy of a more spiritual philosophy thus intersects with ongoing critical discourses that resist the commodification, marketization, managerialization, and wholesale neo-liberalization of academia.⁶¹ While Hadot doesn't explicitly acknowledge the emergence of knowledge capitalism as a central catalyst for the erosion of spirituality within the modern university, it is hard to see how his critique can lead elsewhere. In this section, however, I will only focus on the emergence of the modern research university as an important factor.

For some this may come as a surprise. After all, one of the most important features of the research university, beside the primacy of research over teaching and its holistic conception of knowledge and

⁶⁰ See Hadot, 'Spiritual Exercises', pp. 81-82; Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, pp. 92-94.

⁶¹ See, for example, Achille Mbembe, 'Decolonizing the University: New Directions', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 15.1 (2016), 29-45; Stewart Lawrence and Umesh Sharma, 'Commodification of Education and Academic Labour: Using the Balanced Scorecard in a University Setting', *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 13.5-6 (2002), 661-77; Thomas Bauwens, Denise Reike, and Martín Calisto-Friant, 'Science for Sale? Why Academic Marketization Is a Problem and What Sustainability Research Can Do about It', *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 48 (2023), 100749; Stephen J. Ball, 'Performativity, Commodification and Commitment: An I-Spy Guide to the Neoliberal University', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 60.1 (2012), 17-28.

truth-seeking, is the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake. Does this not perfectly overlap with what I have referred to above as 'spiritual' philosophy, that is, a disinterested philosophical practice that does not aim for material gain? Indeed, this Humboldtian ideal of *Bildung* contrasts with the medieval university, the main goal of which was to supply the emerging European states with lawyers, priests, and medical professionals.⁶² Some may therefore assume that Hadot's ideal of philosophy, which *forms* rather than *informs* students,⁶³ is best achieved precisely in the research university.

Sadly, this is not the case, for two reasons. First of all, the great paradox of the research university is that, despite its calls for academic freedom and autonomy, in reality the modern university fundamentally depends on nation-states (as well as, in recent times, on private businesses).⁶⁴ Philosophical education in the modern age has become an affair of the state. Secondly, as pointed out by Sharpe,⁶⁵ the *Bildung* ideal has always been subordinated to the other ideal of the research university: the systematic conception of knowledge and its pursuit. The research university is designed to train large numbers of students to become independent researchers, obtain PhDs, and publish articles in

⁶² See Thorsten Nybom, 'The Humboldt Legacy: Reflections on the Past, Present, and Future of the European University', *Higher Education Policy*, 16 (2003), 141–59 (pp. 144 ff.); Spencer E. Young, 'Education in Medieval Europe', in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Education*, ed. by John L. Rury and Eileen H. Tamura (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 98–113.

⁶³ See Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, p. 73; Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness*, p. 91.

⁶⁴ See Harold Perkin, 'History of Universities', in *International Handbook of Higher Education*, ed. by James J. F. Forest and Philip G. Altbach (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), pp. 159–205 (pp. 174–78).

⁶⁵ Matthew J. Sharpe, 'Philosophy as a Way of Life, the System, and the Advent of the Research University: Contributions Towards an Unwritten Chapter of the History of PWL', *Academia.edu* <https://www.academia.edu/103740118/Philosophy_as_a_Way_of_Life_the_System_and_the_Advent_of_the_Research_University_Contributions_Towards_an_Unwritten_Chapter_of_the_History_of_PWL> [accessed 9 August 2023].

order to contribute to a seemingly endless expansion of scientific knowledge.⁶⁶

This expansionist objective translates to the 'newness' that nowadays serves as the exclusive hallmark of academic quality. Adding new results, new insights, and new arguments to the growing corpus of philosophical knowledge has become the primary task of the academic philosopher. Of course, this role need not necessarily conflict with the repetitive nature of Hadot's spiritual exercises or his belief in the limited range of positions that can be adopted vis-à-vis philosophy's 'bigger questions'. After all, research practices can at times be repetitious as well, and within each philosophical school, new insights are always possible.

The true departure from the spiritual aim of philosophy as a way of life has to be sought in the clear preference the research university shows for prioritizing research over teaching. This leads academic philosophers to primarily identify as (highly) specialized researchers rather than transformative teachers. Philosophy as a way of life, in contrast, does not subordinate teaching to research. Hadot stressed numerous times how virtually all philosophical texts of the ancient world served teaching purposes and addressed the small community that is the classroom.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, the question of whether or not the abovementioned pursuit of publications qualifies as a spiritual exercise cannot be answered definitively. This highlights a fundamental challenge within Hadot's concept of PWL: spiritual transformation is something that one has to achieve by oneself, and it cannot be effectuated by outside

⁶⁶ John C. Moore, *A Brief History of Universities* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 66–67.

⁶⁷ See Nybom, 'The Humboldt Legacy', p. 144; Hadot, 'Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse', p. 62–64.

coercion.⁶⁸ Since the transformation concerns the self of the philosopher, there is no standardized procedure that could guarantee or even evaluate the spiritual transformation of students. As a result, we can never know for certain whether students are *in general* transformed by academic practices or not. Each case has to be assessed independently.

The absence of a uniform procedure also explains why philosophical education, when limited to merely *informing*, fails. The conveying of theoretical truths can only have a transformative impact on someone's life if the student has already decided to be open to that change. This means that excellent philosophical research abilities do not automatically imply a propensity for spiritual transformation. That is precisely what Hadot means when he says that philosophical discourse originates in an existential choice.⁶⁹

At the same time, the fact that Hadot deems PWL to have a necessary theoretical component implies that reading and commenting on philosophical texts, which university lectures usually consist of, can itself be considered a spiritual exercise.⁷⁰ Even though spiritual transformation will never take place as long as university education focuses solely on preparing students for exams, Hadot argues, this does not necessarily preclude the possibility of philosophy students answering the text's call to 'a work of the self on the self'.⁷¹ This in turn requires, first and foremost, that philosophy teachers themselves practice spiritual exercises:

Here, it is rather he who teaches that has to practice a spiritual exercise. Because to do scientific work, one has to constrain oneself to objectivity, and objectivity can only be the result of a work of

⁶⁸ See Kevin Gary, 'Kierkegaard and Liberal Education as a Way of Life', *Philosophy of Education*, 63 (2007), 151–58 (p. 154).

⁶⁹ See Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, p. 3.

⁷⁰ See Hadot, 'L'enseignement des antiques', pp. 315–16.

⁷¹ Hadot, 'L'enseignement des antiques', p. 316 [my translation].

the self on the self. [...] This spiritual exercise consists of changing one's viewpoint, abandoning the egoist and utilitarian viewpoint of the self of everyday life, in order to elevate oneself to a universal viewpoint. This is already what the interlocutors in the Platonic and Socratic had to do: to rise to the point of the *logos*, of the reason that they had in common, to judge objectively the value of their respective arguments. There is the true beginning of scientific objectivity.⁷²

Good philosophy teachers train themselves in spiritual exercises, which, Hadot concedes, have to be adapted to the contemporary mentality.⁷³ These include the writing, reading, and exegesis of theoretical writings, as long as they invite the transformation of one's being and world.

To sum up, my point is the following. Given the fact that Hadot's critique of academic philosophy revolves around the somewhat vague notion of 'spiritual transformation', it is hard to point out which aspect of academic philosophy would have to change in order to return to practicing philosophy as a way of life. After all, it seems that a banal academic practice such as reading and commenting on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* can already qualify as a spiritual exercise, as long as this text's (trans)formative potential takes centre stage, instead of dryly conveying information. Does this, then, mean that Hadot's concept of PWL, being too tolerant, is useless to effectively critique academic philosophy?

I think not. In the telling passage quoted above, Hadot points to the teacher in particular as an indicator of what practicing philosophy as a way of life in the university setting looks like. What is crucial is the practical judgement of a good teacher. This is different from the judgement of a good researcher, who mainly seeks to add value to the expanding aggregate of philosophical knowledge. Teachers, in contrast, have to look for the transformative potential in a particular text or

⁷² Hadot, 'L'enseignement des antiques', pp. 316–17 [my translation].

⁷³ See Hadot, 'L'enseignement des antiques', p. 318.

exercise. How? By being transformed themselves. If the teacher is spiritually transformed by a particular text or exercise, it is the best (and perhaps only) indication that this text is conducive to a philosophical way of life amongst students.

In short, Hadot's critique of academic philosophy should, if anything, be understood as a call to reinstate the philosophy *teacher* (not researcher) at the centre of academic philosophy. Against the contemporary 'disappearance of the teacher', which is fuelled by postmodern discourses, neoliberal policies, and constructivist language that prefers to frame students as autonomous 'learners',⁷⁴ Hadot emphasizes the vital role of the teacher in enacting philosophy as a transformative practice. This does not imply that the quest for truth through scholarly work has no role in university philosophy. As I have argued at length, the opposite holds true. However, this intellectual pursuit must always aim at spiritual transformation, with the philosophy teacher leading the way.

IV. Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that philosophy as a way of life provides a compelling and nuanced critique of academic philosophy. Based on historical research, PWL employs a narrative that maps the history of philosophy as *institutionalized* philosophy. This perspective challenges the notion that academic philosophy inherently contradicts practicing philosophy as a way of life. The compatibility between the two depends upon the way the university environment is structured.

However, in terms of practical guidance for reshaping the modern research university, PWL's instructions become less clear. PWL does not advocate a more *practical* philosophy. Rather, it underscores the

⁷⁴ Gert J. J. Biesta, 'Giving Teaching Back to Education: Responding to the Disappearance of the Teacher', *Phenomenology & Practice*, 6.2 (2013), 35–49.

importance of amplifying the *spiritual* dimension of philosophy. Nonetheless, this directive remains vague, as it can only truly be grasped through personal experience, primarily by teachers themselves. Hence, Hadot primarily points to teachers when he discusses what PWL in the university setting could look like. Teachers of philosophy should first train *themselves* in spiritual transformation before they proceed to instruct their students.

At present, there are many barriers that hinder the integration of a more spiritual dimension into academic philosophy. These challenges include bad job contracts, an excessive pressure to publish, and inadequate time allocation for teachers to engage and inspire their students. Therefore, I conclude by acknowledging that academia faces deeper structural predicaments that must be solved before philosophy departments can return to practice philosophy as a way of life. Crucially, the fixation on theory over practice is *not* among the problems vexing academic philosophy today.