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Pierre Hadot (1922-2010)

Thomas Dylan Daniel on what one Frenchman says to anglophone philosophy.

Despite the near-ubiquity of analytic philosophy's abstract, narrow, questioning procedures these days, there are still philosophers who pay little attention to its puzzles. Some instead spend their time focused upon the activity of philosophy itself. Pierre Hadot (1922-2010) was one such philosopher. His essays and books have been making their way from their native French into English translations for three decades now, largely due to the work of Michael Chase. Hadot's work focuses heavily upon the historical and social aspects of the philosophical minds he finds himself engaged with – mainly ancient Greek thinkers. These thinkers heavily influenced his critique of overly theoretical but practically vacuous analytical philosophical traditions. He criticized the analytic tradition implicitly rather than explicitly, but, despite his focus upon presenting an alternative, this criticism is among the most effective of all such efforts undertaken in the Twentieth Century"

Background

Born in Paris on 21st February 1922, Pierre Hadot had two brothers, and all three of them became priests. Hadot was assigned to compulsory labor during World War II, and was ordained a priest in 1944 at the age of 22. His work in the Church led him to philosophy. He eventually left the priesthood when he disagreed with a Papal encyclical. Hadot translated Marius Victorinus with Father Paul Henry, initially looking for fragments of Plotinus, and was led to fragmented works by Porphyry instead. However, his project of studying ancient Greek literature was in no way hindered by the Church. In fact, the Christian writers whose works Hadot studied contained references to the ancient Greeks which simply could not have been found anywhere else. And the great Classical thinkers, such as Porphyry, Plotinus, and Plato, were absolutely central to the development of Hadot's thought. Hadot was more than a philosopher: he was also a historian of philosophy whose focus was a desire to understand the ancients as they understood themselves.

Hadot was a lecturer at *École Pratique des Hautes Etudes* from 1964-86, and from 1982-1991 also at the *Collège de France*. He died at Orsay on April 24, 2010, at the age of 88.

Hadot's Philosophical Vision

From his well-informed vantage point, Hadot published a piece about American philosopher Henry Thoreau in 1994 in French entitled 'There Are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but not Philosophers'. This work poignantly states some of the overarching views Hadot held regarding philosophy:

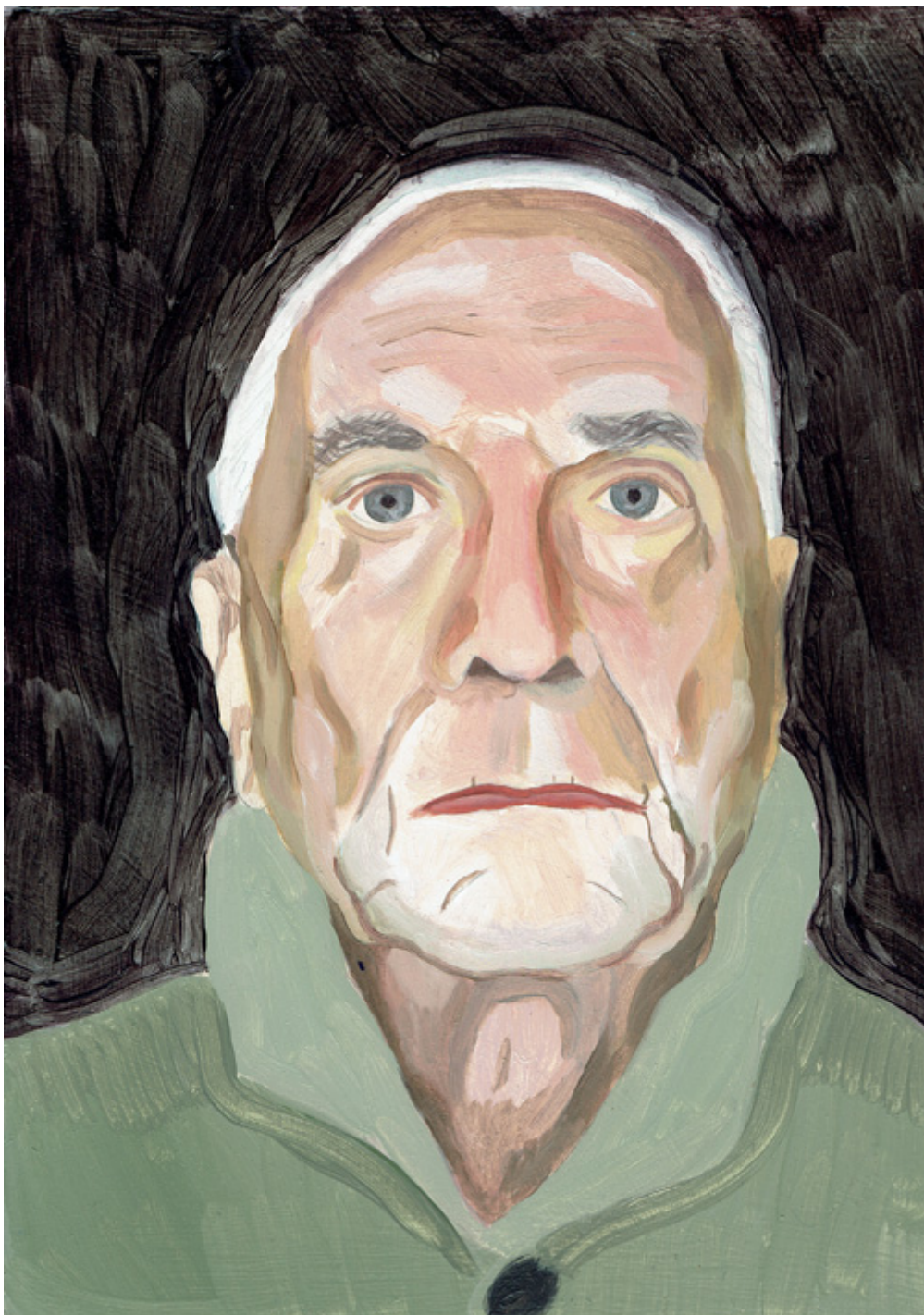
"The experience recounted in [Thoreau's book] *Walden* seems... extremely interesting for us because in choosing to live in the woods for some time, Thoreau wanted to perform a philosophical act, that is to say, to devote himself to a certain mode of philosophical life that included... manual labor and poverty, but also opened up to him an immensely enlarged perception of the world."
(*The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, no. 3, 2005, trans. J.A. Simmons.)

In *Walden*, Hadot saw philosophical *action*, which is close to the way of life he saw the ancients as having lived. The critique of analytical philosophers evident in this perspective, then, is that “in being content with theoretical discourse, they encourage men to keep living in an absurd manner” (*ibid*).

Hadot does not entirely despise theoretical discourse, and allows for its necessity; his contention is merely that there needs to be action involved as well. As Luc Brisson and Michael Chase note in their essay, ‘Behind the Veil – In Memory of Pierre Hadot’ (in *Common Knowledge* 17, 3, 2011):

“Hadot’s writings are not only works of erudition; they are also exhortations to adopt a philosophical way of life, in any one of its many guises... Hadot’s writings make us understand that, in antiquity, religion and philosophy were inseparable; that interpreting an author went beyond an objective reading of texts... and that philosophical argument could not be divided off from everyday life.”

Indeed, the bulk of Hadot’s work seems to revolve around the necessity of reclaiming the *activity* associated with the ancient tradition of thought. In this way, Hadot runs counter to the present popular analytic trend, which seems to be more preoccupied with truths than life – including delineating the sorts of actions which *should* be taken by individuals in particular situations. The assumption underlying an analytic approach to an ethical problem such as Philippa Foot’s trolley problem – about whether one should divert a runaway trolley to kill one innocent person instead of letting it kill five innocents – is that there must be some truth which is to be understood by asking people analytical questions and collecting and analysing the answers they give. Hadot’s interests involve an entirely different focus: philosophical individuals, philosophical schools, philosophical lives. However, Hadot might approve of Foot’s problem, if it’s employed in an introductory-level philosophy course and applied as a means of helping students learn to do philosophy. Hence, it is not precisely fair to categorize him as an opponent of analytical philosophy. Rather, his idea is to embrace both analytical methodology *and* philosophy as a way of life – so long as neither is entirely neglected.



Portrait of Pierre Hadot © Darren McAndrew 2016

Philosophy As A Way Of Life

Two of his books that have been translated into English provide us with further metaphilosophical insight into Hadot: *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (initially published in French in 1981) and *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (first published in French in 1995). The latter book is the smoother read, but the former is the more substantial contribution, consisting of a deeper account of Hadot's particular philosophical themes.

Philosophy as a Way of Life explains that the goal of history is to structure an account of events from which conclusions can be drawn. In contrast to Michel Foucault – who advocates the ceaseless development of new readings of texts and events – Hadot believed that it is possible to understand the past once a sufficiently cogent account has been given of it. Yet the project of understanding the past remains incomplete, due to the faults of

historians who have come before. As Hadot writes, “error was the result of bad exegetical mistranslation, and faulty understanding. Nowadays, however, historians seem to consider *all* exegetical thought as the result of mistakes or misunderstandings” (*Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase, p.74).

In an essay called ‘Spiritual Exercises’, Hadot connects ancient and more modern thinkers around the theme of reasoning in conjunction with living. Reading is not a departure from this central motif: “And yet we have forgotten *how* to read: how to pause, liberate ourselves from our worries, return into ourselves, and leave aside our search for subtlety and originality, in order to meditate calmly, ruminate, and let the texts speak to us” (p.109). Hadot’s anxiety about the crises of information, entertainment and advertising confronted by modern people represents a common thread with other philosophers, and his solution to this problem is to focus upon reading, upon thinking, upon living a well-reasoned life. Other contemporary thinkers working on similar issues include Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, MacIntyre and Pirsig, to name just a handful; but it is no accident that, of all these philosophers, the one most focused upon maintaining and encouraging the practical application of philosophical thought is the one whose work is the most accessible.

What Is Ancient Philosophy?

Hadot’s concept of the circumstances within which philosophy finds itself becomes clear in *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*. He frames the discussion within this brief characterization: “*Philoposia*, for instance, was the pleasure and interest one took in drinking; *philotimia* was a propensity to acquire honors. *Philosophia*, therefore, would be the interest one took in wisdom” (trans. Michael Chase, 2002, p.16). Here again, Hadot thinks that the intersection of theoretical and practical wisdom is the ground upon which good life is produced. “From this perspective, then, we may oppose a purely theoretic philosophical discourse to a practical, lived philosophical life” (p.80). Hadot’s philosophical viewpoint is perhaps summed up best in his statement that “Reflection is inseparable from the will” (p.273).

By discussing the successful ideas of the past, Hadot makes salient points about the present – his reading of ancient philosophy provides a clear, accessible platform from which to present his vision of the importance of remembering to *practice* philosophy. By contrast, wisdom is treated by the analytic tradition as though it’s like a game of chess, in that the solution to the problem is all that’s really relevant. Well, Hadot is not going to push this line quite that far; but he does want to say that philosophical reasoning is in itself very important to human beings – a key part of the art of being a good human. This point is easily discovered in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, among other ancient Greek texts.

It is worth noting that Hadot did not deride what might be seen as opposing viewpoints. In fact, there is seldom any reference to the analytic philosophy of the Twentieth Century in his work at all. By ignoring those who partook of the analytic style – from Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore to Robert Nozick and John Rawls – Hadot made clear the absolute difference between the way in which these thinkers pursue philosophy from their armchairs and the way he believed that it should be practiced throughout life. Although this does constitute a conflict, the emphasis upon reflective, philosophical, living evident in these works is merely intended to quietly return our focus to the notion that philosophy can be lived as well as spoken of. Though many such efforts were made, no other Twentieth Century philosopher was as effective in this pursuit as Hadot.

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