Hadot: - Questions and Perspectives

With Hadot, we get a reading that focuses upon the Ancient Greeks. For these thinkers, the key question of ethics was "Who shall I BE?", rather than "How shall I decide?". Thus, Character, the development of a way of life, of being transformed within, to be a certain type of person, is the key issue. When a method is offered such as Aristotle's method of finding the mean], it is offered to be remade, to become a certain sort of person. From the Greeks, as from a religion, we get the notion of a morality or an ethos as being "a way of life". Hadot will now look over all the ancient Greek schools, and sum up what they meant.

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On Religion and/versus Philosophy, Hadot makes a few points. The ancient Greek schools strove to construct "a rational theology" we see this in Epicurus, with his rational dismissal of the notion of angry or punishing gods].

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Once Christianity is on the scene, "all philosophies since the Middle Ages have felt the influence of Christianity. Whether to fortify Christian doctrine "-directly or indirectly"- or to combat it". So, the issues of human nature, free will, immortality, sources of duty and obligation, sources of meaning in life, etc., are all arenas where these debates play out.

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On the surface, as a contrast, one can say that today, to do philosophy is to do a theoretical and conceptual activity [and this is ultimately a diminishing turn of events, in Hadot's view]. Whereas, for the ancient Greeks, philosophy was a way of life, an answer to the question "who shall I be", and "how shall I live". But, optimistically, Hadot thinks this older and richer notion of philosophy as way of life is still with us. One comes to the topics listed above [meaning in life, free will, immortality, etc.], not as conceptual puzzles but as desires or deep quandaries that, when answered, will form a part of how one then lives in the world.

If today in 2016, one thinks of philosophy as merely ideas or theories for discussion, this is because the modern university uses this model to set up philosophy classes and textbooks, thus hiding the earnest question of "who shall I be” behind formal outlining of key topics and ideas that one can memorize for a test.

274 A- The real point of philosophy is " to act upon souls", "to convert, to cure, or to exhort an audience, the point was always and above all not to communicate to them some ready-made knowledge but to form them. to transform"

275 - We can all be philosophers, not by getting a PhD or publishing articles on specialized topics, but by living the ideas of the Stoics, the Epicureans, etc. [Just as one can be a Mormon by living their ideals, rather than by writing a book on the Mormon creed. And now to the specifics of the ancient Greek schools. What was their specific advice for how to live

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- Themes in Stoic and Epicurean thought:

live with an awareness of death, the next breath not guaranteed. SEE the universe, see the beauty of the now and of nature. Cultivate inner calm or "serenity".

276 "take flight every day” let’s puzzle about this advice.

277 - You and I have a more difficult task than did the Stoics or Epicureans, because they had a community, they had friends of the same creed, who could help each other to remember these insights. You and I, by contrast, hold a book in our hands.

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By this point in the essay, Hadot has given a long list of philosophers and thinkers that he considers "wise", i.e. those who continued the themes and way of life of the ancient Greeks: Kant, Wittgenstein, Montaigne, Goethe, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, the whole of Existentialism. But these have been solitary victories, rarely finding the good luck of a community of fellow thinkers. A good book to read on this topic is Alain De BottonA's text "The Consolations of Philosophy", in which he, chapter by chapter, illustrated how these key philosophers extract "how to live" from their more abstract theories.

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Also, Hadot emphasizes a two-stage process by which you and I today, like Hume, Nietzsche, etc., can become a follower of the way of life of the ancient Greek schools. In stage one, one strips the original words of Epicurus, Epictetus, etc., of the outdated science and religious language. So, we don't go to Epicurus for the best theory of gravity, matter, and energy etc., and we don't talk of "the gods". So, stage one is to separate out the moral advice or the way of life, from the outdated science or cultural blindness’s. Then in stage two, we no longer fight the recruiting wars, we no longer must strictly PICK ONE of the schools. Instead we can extract from each school what we can benefit from. Hume called himself "half-Stoic, half-Epicurean", and repeatedly drew upon the reasoning strategies of the Skeptics. Nietzsche is also willing to "mix and match" [page 277]. The Epicurean is the wise voice in normal times, and the Stoic in abnormal times. In normal times, know that the universe is neutral, but nature is inspiring, as is friendship. And rationally pursued desires give one the substance of one's day to day life. In times of sorrow or danger, the Stoic's advice, to make peace with the inevitable, and cultivate inner strength and calm, becomes good advice. And the Cynic's point, that our culture often lies to us, and that nature is a better guide to joy and fulfillment, can also help us.

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For Hadot, which school seems to call to me with the most urgency is likely because of my personality type or as he writes "I believe these models correspond to permanent, fundamental attitudes which all human beings find necessary when they set out to seek wisdom". It is transcultural, and, Hadot sees clear overlap with the Orient, not because individuals carried these ideas to other cultures, but because each culture had the plurality of visions, that lead to the schools. Hadot specifically notes both Buddhist and Taoist affinities with ideas within Stoic and Skeptic thought.

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And the tradition of the "living sage", the thinker who personifies their teachings via their way of life, is stronger in the East than in the West, according to Hadot.

And now Hadot starts to sum it all up.

279 - For you and me today, one risk is to take PHIL 305 as a "technical course", to see the course as being about jargon and abstract issues, rather than a call "to be in a different way".

280 Another risk is to see Philosophy as optional, in the way that all of us see "sociology" as optional, a course I either might or might not take during my education. Philosophy is, in contrast, your birthright, and Philosophy is the ongoing task of puzzling about "how I shall live".

280-281 - A final risk is to abandon the human community, to "save oneself" while shunning the larger human community. Hadot used Friedman to say that we must find small groups, some subset that we can engage with. Despair for Hadot can come, when we see the twin blindness’s of our culture, its retreat into commerce and business, coupled with the magnitude of human suffering that we are encouraged to explain away or ignore. A thoughtful person can easily feel disgust at their culture, or helpless to change the tide of human tendencies. But for Hadot, the Stoic Marcus Aurelius gets the final word, a word of sober and somber encouragement.

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