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EDUCATION, PHILOSOPHY AND THE ART OF LIVING

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Theory and practice, discourse and life, affect one another; people become philosophers because they are able and willing to be the best human type and to live as well as they possibly can.

— Alexander Nehamas  
*The Art of Living*

In *The Art of Living*, Alexander Nehamas traces the foundations of philosophy as “the art of living,” and the philosophers who were/are its main practitioners. According to Nehamas, Socrates was perhaps the earliest and most notable to attempt to tie his thinking to his own personal development. Whether Socrates was a real or a fictional figure, his quest for knowledge and the beliefs he honed along the way were not divorced from the way he attempted to live his life. Socrates struggled to reconcile and make coherent the results of the elenchus (his questioning and subsequent dialoguing) with who he was. As we know, Socrates thought that knowing the good entailed doing it. Therefore, whatever ‘truths’ or judgments of the good he arrived at, he necessarily sought to bring them about. And in the case of the virtues, he sought to live them.

Socrates’ public self-shaping thus became a hallmark of what the utilization and application of reason to our most fundamental beliefs might mean for human lives. It could be argued that employing our ability for rational thought in an effort to determine how we ought to live is, itself, a rational and deliberate act. Socrates represented not only the dialogic search for knowledge of how to live, but the purposeful self-examination and correction that are the result of doing so with integrity. Socrates and the modern thinkers Nehamas examines: Montaigne, Nietzsche and Foucault, represent for us models of “how a unified, meaningful life can be constructed out of the chance events that constitute it” (Nehamas 1998, 7).

Socrates held that regardless of her inherited circumstances, the individual has the capacity to align her behavior with the dictates of reason; to overcome her passions and achieve concordance between her thoughts and actions, if not a divine perfection. By engaging in inquiry into possible and potential beliefs, actions and modes of living, the individual would then be in a position to apply the knowledge she attained.

In admitting his own inability to have true knowledge, Socrates seems to deny the possibility of ever knowing what virtue, justice and the good are, let

alone living in strict accordance with them. It is in fact ironic that the life of Socrates came to represent the virtuous life for rational creatures when, by his own admission (or perhaps with a false humility), he claims that he did not know for certain what virtue was and therefore, could not and would not teach it to others. As Nehamas puts it at one point, “Socrates did not have what he himself considered necessary in order to be what he was” (Nehamas 1998, 68).

The ironic stance represented in the person of Socrates is a way of living; a mode of being in the world that can be adopted. The process of looking at the knowledge and culture that one has been given, rationally questioning that knowledge/culture, refusing what does not appear reasonable and searching for an alternative is Socrates’ way of life. The difficulty is that commitment to this way of living is not wholly justifiable. Although having reasoned to the same conclusions over and over, Socrates realized, of course that trying to live in accordance with truth, justice, goodness and beauty does not carry with it any necessity to do so. He recognized as well that knowledge of how best to live can never be known with certainty nor can any version be required universally. Nehamas explains that what makes Socrates’ insistence on living according to right reason (when he believes ever knowing what right reason is impossible) ironic (as opposed to contradictory) is the fact that the knowledge he *seeks* is true or certain knowledge of how to live. Knowing that neither he nor any other person can ever attain such knowledge, there remains knowledge that he *lives by*, which is the product of his dialogues with others, his lifelong dialectical inquiry into how best to live. The dialogic process and the attendant development of personal judgment is a practice which yields a different, ‘artistic’ knowing, or knowledge of the craft of living (Nehamas 1998).

An important fact about Socrates’ example of self-making is that he did not want others to imitate him, nor did he argue that he knew what was right for others. In fact, he admitted famously to only knowing one thing. And yet, it is to Socrates that Nehamas’s philosophers—Montaigne, Nietzsche, Foucault and Nehamas in particular look for guidance in living the philosophical life. Pierre Hadot whom Foucault drew from in formulating a notion of ‘care of the self’ (Foucault 1986), also writes on the history of philosophy as a way of life, scrutinizing the figure of Socrates in his historical yet highly normative text, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. The picture of Socratic philosophy left with Hadot is:

Philosophy then appears in its original aspect: not as a theoretical construct, but as a method for training people to live and to look at the world a new way. It is an attempt to transform mankind (Hadot 1995, 107).

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## PHILOSOPHY ACQUIESCES

Both Nehamas and Hadot begin their considerations of the philosophical art of living by discussing philosophy's unfortunate evolution into a wholly theoretical discipline. In the West, abstract argumentation among the initiated has replaced the real-world philosophizing that anyone could engage in. Throughout much of Ancient times, the two sides of philosophy co-existed; the systemization of thought and theoretical discourse on the one hand, and (especially after Socrates) an ethical/spiritual investigation into the meaningful life on the other. According to Hadot however, Christianity took 'control' of the latter leaving philosophy proper to work out the minutia of logic, systematize the universe, and devise conceptual distinctions. As Hadot explains:

Philosophy was now no longer the supreme science, but the 'servant of theology;' it supplied the latter with the conceptual, logical, physical, and metaphysical materials it needed (Hadot 1995, 270).

In the time of the Renaissance, individuals resurrected the study of the ancient and once common techniques of philosophy-as-living. The research and practice of these techniques of critical selfhood represented resumed inquiry into the good life in attempts to produce unique and worthy styles of living. Like the ancients, those who lived in the Renaissance understood philosophy as a kind of spiritual practice. What was handed down in Medieval times however was a philosophy devoid of practical and life-sustaining significance. According to Hadot, the elimination of alternative spiritual/ethical choices AND the abandonment of teaching the skills necessary to design a way of living was caused by the advance of theology, which had as its task the clarification of the *only* possible choice for how one might live—namely, as a Christian. Philosophy became simply the tool of theology, which claimed for itself all spiritual exercises, life-shaping contemplation and "technique[s] of inner living." (Hadot 1995, 269) Again Hadot contends that:

we can say that philosophy in the Middle Ages had become a purely theoretical and abstract activity. It was no longer a way of life. Ancient spiritual exercises were no longer a part of philosophy but found themselves integrated into Christian spirituality (Hadot 1995, 270).

Whether Hadot's description of the extinction of philosophy as a way of life is accurate is not as important as its demise itself. For the most part, the discipline of philosophy as taught in the academy did not include instruction in, or modeling of the creation of a meaningfully constructed and coherent life. Eventually in fact, what was being taught in the academy was not the *practice of* philosophy, but *how to* teach it. Just as scientists bemoan the convolution of genuine scientific investigation and experimentation into an exercise in memorization and re-

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production, philosophy too has suffered from being institutionalized. It is not philosophy alone that has suffered, I believe that as students of life, we have suffered as well.

#### QUESTIONS FOR EDUCATION

The task of philosophy, then, is to educate people (Hadot 1995, 83).

The questions that philosophy as ‘the art of living’ raises for education can be deciphered by surveying the results of the institutionalization explained above. What have we given up by allowing questions concerning and the practice of life-shaping to be wholly parochial concerns? How might education look if we reinstalled the *practice* of philosophy one that affects daily living, as opposed to philosophy as history?

In his introduction, Nehamas assures us that he is not urging a “return to a conception of philosophy as a way of life” (Nehamas 1998, 2). One has to wonder then at his diligent attention to its practice and his insistence in tracing a line of practitioners into the present. One seems to detect as well that this is more than an exercise for Nehamas, that perhaps he has deliberately, but regrettably, put off engaging in this inquiry. Well into his own career as a philosopher, Nehamas notes that most of us never accept Socrates’ invitation to explore what manner of life we would live if our living had to be aligned with our philosophizing; and conversely, if our philosophizing were to serve our living.

The reason, says Nehamas, is that it is simply too difficult. It is one thing to read the dialogues, to follow Socrates’ reasoning and to *agree* with him. It is quite another to do as Socrates would have his interlocutors do (though many turn away) which is:

to examine their beliefs on any subject of importance to them, to determine to what other beliefs they are logically related, to accept only those that are compatible with one another, and to live their lives accordingly (Nehamas 1998, 42).

Philosophy, as Socrates and others have practiced it into the present, is a demanding discipline not only because of its rigor, but also for what it asks of those who engage in it. Philosophy as the art of living, is the ongoing examination of one’s central beliefs and of the consistency of those beliefs, the result of which quite often means a fundamental change in who one is. The ‘examined life’ of which Socrates speaks is more than a personal survey, or some kind of intellectual exercise. The Socratic dialogues demand not simply our acknowledgement, but our willingness to engage in the highly personal task of enacting our daily existence in congruence with our beliefs about such ideals as “justice, wisdom, courage, or temperance” indeed with any seeming virtue. Here

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Nehamas quotes Michael Frede (Frede, 1992) in an effort to explain what is required of any who would respond in earnest to Socrates' suggestion (through example) that philosophy be practiced on oneself:

to revise beliefs that are so deeply interwoven with the fabric of our life in such a way as to achieve and maintain consistency is extremely difficult, in part because it means, or at least might mean, a basic change of life (Nehamas 1998, 42).

Examining one's beliefs with regard to life's most important questions, purposes and possible directions has historically been connected to (if not the entirety of) the process of becoming educated. Among other reasons, perhaps fearing conflicting viewpoints, we have removed philosophical inquiry from our schools. It is the discourse surrounding these very questions, purposes and possibilities however, that offer opportunities for individuals and whole groups to make meaning of their existence and perhaps in transforming themselves, transform the culture as well. As Hadot states, "For real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us 'be' in a different way" (Hadot 1995, 265).

It is valuable to our democracy and it is crucial to individual liberty that students be 'taught' how to approach questions pertaining to the formation of themselves and the world and how to assess various answers to them. Included in several "lists" of Ancient exercises designed to promote such processes are some recognizably educational practices. Hadot uncovered these specific educational skills as requisite for self-making: research, thorough investigation, reading, listening, attention, self-mastery and indifference to indifferent things (Hadot 1995, 84).<sup>1</sup> These are not simply abstract intellectual tools or educational *ends in themselves*, the need to acquire these abilities comes from an understanding of freedom as entailing self-agency, thus making it impossible to ignore self-construction. We should of course be vigilant against indoctrination but, avoidance of teaching students *what* to think should not deter us from teaching them the inevitability of personhood and/or the practice of conscious selfhood as a practice of positive freedom.

Those philosophers who were and are concerned with constructing/ shaping their lives are the very ones who would warn against pushing some kind of prescriptive personhood on others. That does not mean however that we ignore the ongoing shaping of a student's person that takes place in front of us, consciously or not, and will inevitably result in her becoming 'someone.' How can we continue to eliminate the possibility of her directing or bettering her own formation? Leaving philosophy out of education amounts to haphazard, incoherent and possibly even externally imposed personhood. The inability to recognize, critique and construct unique and meaningful lives will, in the end, prevent each from practicing her freedom. When we fail to ask students to think

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deeply and critically about their own beliefs and apply them in any consistent way to their choices of action, we are preventing them from becoming fully themselves. We should instead teach all students to become philosophers—lovers and seekers of wisdom, to practice the art of living—the intentional crafting of singular selves, along with education’s most practiced role of providing “grist for the mill.” Each student might make his own journey toward wisdom, by becoming “the philosopher [who] develops his strength of soul, modifies his inner climate, transforms his vision of the world, and, finally, the entirety of his being” (Hadot 1995, 102).

#### REFERENCES

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#### NOTES

From Philo Judaeus as quoted in Hadot 1995, 253. Hadot gives these translations of the Greek words: *zetesis*, *skepsis*, *anagnosis*, *alroasis* and *enkrateia* respectively.

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