

PROFESSOR PIERRE HADOT AND THE TASK OF PHILOSOPHY

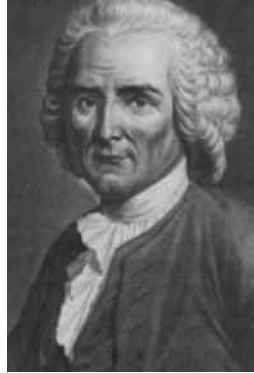


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1778

July 2, Thursday: [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](#) died at the picturesque stone hermitage in the English Garden of the Marquis de Girardin at Ermenonville. During the final decade of his life he had produced primarily autobiographical writings. The most important had been his unpublished *CONFESSIONS*, modeled upon the *CONFESSIONS* of St. Augustine (this would be published in 1782). In addition, his *ROUSSEAU JUGE DE JEAN-JACQUES* (*ROUSSEAU, JUDGE OF JEAN-JACQUES*, which would see publication in 1780) replied to specific charges. Once again he had been offered refuge at carefully crafted hermitages on the estates of French noblemen, initially by the Prince de Conti and then by the Marquis de Girardin, and his *LES RÉVERIES DU PROMENEUR SOLITAIRE* (*REVERIES OF THE SOLITARY WALKER*, which would also see publication in 1782) displayed the

lyric serenity he had at a late date been able to maintain.



According to Professor [Pierre Hadot](#), in this *RÊVERIES* text we are able to find both the echo of ancient traditions in regard to the role of philosophizing and the anticipation of certain modern attitudes in regard to the pursuit of philosophy:

What is remarkable ... is that we cannot help but recognize the intimate connection which exists, for Rousseau, between cosmic ecstasy and the transformation of his inner attitude with regard to time. On the one hand, "Every individual object escapes him; he sees and feels nothing which is not in the whole." Yet, at the same time, "Time no longer means anything [to him] ... the present lasts forever, without letting its duration be sensed, and without any trace of succession. There is no sensation - either of privation or of enjoyment, pleasure or pain, desire or fear- other than the one single sensation of our existence. Here Rousseau analyzes, in a most remarkable way, the elements which constitute and make possible a disinterested perception of the world. What is required is concentration on the present moment, a concentration in which the spirit is, in a sense, without past or present, as it experiences the simple "sensation of existence." Such concentration is not, however, a mere turning in upon oneself. On the contrary: the sensation of existence is, inseparably, the sensation of being *in* the whole and the sensation of the existence of the whole.

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[Bear in mind that Professor Hadot would discover, in the non-ancient world, precisely three philosophers to have been supremely worthy of the ancient tradition in philosophy. These three were [Rousseau](#), [Goethe](#), and [Thoreau](#).



What is now taken to be the task of the philosopher, that of communicating “an encyclopedic knowledge in the form of a system of propositions and of concepts that would reflect, more or less well, the system of the world,” is, according to Professor Hadot, of modern provenance. This ancient tradition in philosophy, before the beginning of the triumph of science in dominating and subduing nature, to the contrary, amounted more to *forming* than to *informing*:

[A]ncient philosophy, at least beginning from the sophists and Socrates, intended, in the first instance, to form people and to transform souls. That is why, in Antiquity, philosophical teaching is given above all in oral form, because only the living word, in dialogues, in conversations pursued for a long time, can accomplish such an action. The written work, considerable as it is, is therefore most of the time only an echo or a complement of this oral teaching.

Hadot terms this “psychagogy, or the direction of souls.” He quotes the ironic remark that Plato put in Socrates’s mouth in the *SYMPOSIUM*, “My dear Agathon ... I only wish that wisdom were the kind of thing that flowed ... from the vessel that was full to the one that was empty.”

Hadot has his own version of what Aldous Huxley termed “the perennial philosophy.” In his version of this, “the theme of value of the present instant plays a fundamental role in all the philosophical schools. In short it is a consciousness of inner freedom. It can be summarized in a formula of this kind: you need only yourself in order immediately to find inner peace by ceasing to worry about the past and the future. You can be happy right now, or you will never be happy.... This is Horace’s famous *laetus in praesens*, this ‘enjoyment of the pure present,’ to use André Chastel’s fine expression about Marsilio Ficino, who had taken this very formula of Horace’s for his motto.... I cannot resist the pleasure of evoking the dialogue between Faust and Helena, the climax of part two of Goethe’s *FAUST*:

*Nun schaut der Geist nicht vorwärts, nicht zurück,
Die Gegenwart allein ist unser Glück.*

And so the spirit looks neither ahead nor behind.
The present alone is our joy.

According to Professor Hadot’s understanding of the Stoic teachings, *prosoche* (attention to oneself) had been their primary spiritual imperative.

Thanks to his spiritual vigilance, the Stoic always has “at

hand" (*procheiron*) the fundamental rule of life: that is, the distinction between what depends on us and what does not.

We could also define this attitude as "concentration on the present moment."

Many unpleasantnesses of life that we take as evils simply "are not evils, since they do not depend on us." This *prosoche* was to become the fundamental attitude of the Christian monk:

Many unpleasantnesses of life that we take as evils simply "are not evils, since they do not depend on us."¹ This *prosoche* was to become the fundamental attitude of the Christian monk:

[A]ttention and vigilance presuppose continuous concentration on the present moment, which must be lived as if it were, simultaneously, the first and last moment of life.... Attention to the present is simultaneously control of one's thoughts, acceptance of the divine will, and the purification of one's intentions with regard to others. We have an excellent summary of this constant attention to the present in a well-known MEDITATION of Marcus Aurelius:

Everywhere and at all times, it is up to you to rejoice piously at what is occurring at the present moment, to conduct yourself with justice towards the people who are present here and now, and to apply rules of discernment [*emphilotekhnein*] to your present representations [*phantasiai*], so that nothing slips in that is not objective.



1. [Goethe](#) has his Mephistopheles be "philosophical" and declare »*Denn alles, was entsteht, ist wert, dass es zu Grunde geht.*« "For it is appropriate that everything that comes into being should also come to ruin." Such resignation, such acceptance of limitation, was typical of the philosophy of Rousseau, of Goethe, of Thoreau, and of Hadot.



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1992

Professor [Pierre Hadot](#)'s *LA CITADELLE INTERIEUR INTRODUCTION AUX PENSÉES DE MARC AURÈLE* (Paris): the Stoic exercises his concentration "on the present instant, which consists, on the one hand, in living as if we were seeing the world for the first and for the last time, and, on the other hand, in being conscious that, in this lived presence of the instant, we have access to the totality of time and of the world." There are individuals who combine the characteristics of the Stoic with the characteristics of the Epicurean, merging the Stoic "communion with nature" with the Epicurean "sensualism," practicing not only the Stoic spiritual exercises of vigilance but also the Epicurean spiritual exercises aimed at the true pleasure of simply existing. Eventually the professor would be using, as his type cases for this sort of mental merger, the figures of [Goethe](#), [Rousseau](#), and [Thoreau](#).

Hadot apparently has been the first modern to have recognized that the preserved aphorisms of the emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, first made public in the West by the Zurich humanist Andreas Gesner in 1558/1559 in a book now mistitled *MEDITATIONS* (a better translator, he insists, would have rendered this as *EXHORTATIONS TO HIMSELF*), actually belonged to an antique type of writing known as *hypomnemata* (a day-to-day record of one's struggles with oneself, in a special private ledger): "Marcus wrote day to day without trying to compose a work intended for the public; his *MEDITATIONS* are for the most part exhortations to himself, a dialogue with himself." Clearly, then, the emperor had been composing these sound bytes within a prefabricated and limiting set of options, and in order to separate that format from whatever novel content which he had been pouring into it, we need to understand what that format had been: "One will therefore only be able to understand the sense of this work when one has discovered, among other things, the prefabricated schemata that were imposed on it." Our real interest is in the choices made, and we evaluate those choices against possible choices that weren't made: "Before presenting the interpretation of a text, one should first begin by trying to distinguish between, on the one hand, the traditional elements, one could say prefabricated, that the author employs and, on the other hand, what he wants to do with them. Failing to make this distinction, one will consider as symptomatic formulas or attitudes which are not at all such, because they do not emanate from the personality of the author, but are imposed on him by tradition. One must search for what the author wishes to say, but also for what he can or cannot say, what he must or must not say, as a function of the traditions and the circumstances that are imposed on him."

[E]ach time Marcus wrote down one of his *MEDITATIONS*, he knew exactly what he was doing: he was exhorting himself to practice one of the disciplines: either that of desire, of action, or of assent. At the same time, he was exhorting himself to practice philosophy itself, in

its divisions of physics, ethics, and logic.



1993

June: According to a paper "Réflexions sur Walden" delivered at the École Normale Supérieure, Professor Pierre Hadot had discovered through a reading of WALDEN that Thoreau, in deciding to reside at the pond, "had undertaken a philosophical act." (Unfortunately, this paper would never itself be published and we can now only infer its contents by reading between the lines and in the footnotes of the Professor's subsequent productions.)

1995

Pierre Hadot. PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE: SPIRITUAL EXERCISES FROM SOCRATES TO FOUCAULT. Edited with an introduction by Arnold I. Davidson. Parts of this work were first published as EXERCICES SPIRITUELS ET PHILOSOPHIE ANTIQUE by Etudes Augustiniennes in Paris in 1987 (2d edition), but this is now out of print, and have re-emerged in the English edition (Blackwell Ltd., Oxford), translated by Michael Chase, printed and bound in India.



Arnold I. Davidson comments in the Introduction on the subtlety of "the process that Hadot has labeled 'contamination,' that is, 'the process according to which paganism or Christianity were led to adopt the ideas or the behaviors characteristic of their adversary.' ... Christianity borrowed the very idea of theology,



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its methods and principles, from paganism... [B]oth pagans and Christians had an analogous conception of truth; truth was an historical reality of divine origin, a revelation given by God to humanity at a particular time. As a consequence, their conceptions of philosophy and theology were identical – ‘human thought could only be exegetical, that is, must try to interpret an initial datum: the revelation contained in myths, traditions, the most ancient laws.’ Not only was Christianity contaminated by the pagan idea of theology, but the ancient Christian idea of hierarchical monotheism, so central to early Christianity, could be found within the evolution of paganism itself, especially under the influence of the imperial ideology. The conceptions of monotheism and hierarchy that served to define the Byzantine Christian world were thus also contaminations from the pagan world; indeed, these ideas could be said to sum up the entire essence of late paganism... [T]he principal scholarly exercise was the explication of a text.”

Davidson points up the fact that “In the most interesting of cases, we may find that a history of misinterpretation and a history of philosophical creativity are intimately linked.” for Hadot, a misinterpretation of a given text might well be considered as not merely a mistake, but instead amount to an act, whether deliberate or unintentional, of creation and liberation. Hadot was fond of such expressions as “certainly a misinterpretation, but a creative misinterpretation.”

Davidson considers that the concept of *contresens* is central to Hadot’s interpretation of the history of exegetical thought: This *contresens* covers not only the general phenomena of misunderstanding and misinterpretation but also strict cases of mere mistakes in translation.

Davidson points out that “[M]any modern historians of ancient philosophy have begun from the assumption that ancient philosophers were attempting, in the same way as modern philosophers, to construct systems,” but that this is a presentist misapprehension of the preserved ancient writings. They hadn’t functioned that way. In order to understand how they had functioned, one cannot look to more recent philosophizing, but must instead situate them in what Professor Hadot terms the “living praxis from which they emanated.” Hadot insisted that the antique written work in philosophy had been only a material support for the spoken word, intended only to become again the spoken word, “like a modern record or cassette which are only an intermediary between two events: the recording and the rehearing.” Davidson puts it that the “propositional element” simply was not the important aspect of ancient philosophical teaching.

2005

Professor [Pierre Hadot](#) of the Collège de France's "*Il y a de nos jours des professeurs de philosophie, mais pas de philosophes*," which had previously been published in French in 1994 as part of HENRY D. THOREAU, ed. Michel Granger (Paris: L'Herne, pages 188-94), and then in 2002 in *EXERCICES SPIRITUELS ET PHILOSOPHIE ANTIQUE*, new edition, revised and expanded (Paris: A. Michel, pages 333-42), appeared in [The Journal of Speculative Philosophy](#) (Volume 19, Issue 3, pages 229-237) in English translation as "There Are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but not Philosophers." It had been translated by J. Aaron Simmons of Vanderbilt University and the notes were by Mason Marshall of Vanderbilt University:



It is remarkable that the first pages of WALDEN are dedicated to the critique of man's habitual life. [Thoreau](#) ironically described it as a worse punishment than the asceticism (*l'ascese*) of the Brahmans and the twelve tasks of Hercules. Men lead a senseless life (*une vie d'insensé*). They are in ignorance and error, absorbed by artificial worries and unnecessarily harsh tasks. They are only machines, tools of their tools.² Their existence is only despair or resignation.

The reason for men's unhappiness, in the eyes of Thoreau, is that they ignore what is necessary and sufficient for life, that is to say, simply everything for maintaining their vital heat. "The grand necessity, then, for our bodies, is to keep warm, to keep the vital heat in us."³ In fact, as Thoreau will

2. Thoreau (1971, 37 [121]). [Hadot indicates that he uses Germaine Landré-Augier's French translation of WALDEN (1967). Herein we replace his quotations from it with Thoreau's original English, and in the notes we cite the Princeton Edition, providing page references to Landré-Augier's translation in brackets. In addition, where Hadot quotes passages originally written in Latin or ancient Greek, whenever possible we replace his French translations of those passages with English translations that have already been published, altering citations in his notes accordingly. Finally, wherever he quotes a passage originally penned in French, an already published English translation is inserted, and in Hadot's note a citation of its source is substituted for his citation. All other material added to Hadot's notes in this essay is enclosed in brackets.

An explanation is in order here since Michael Chase, who produced almost all of the existing English translations of Hadot's writings, warns that "Hadot's understanding of ancient philosophy has ... been shaped by his own interpretation and translation of ancient texts, so that to replace his translations by those from some "standard" English version would, I feel, render his thought incomprehensible." (Chase makes that remark in his "Translator's Note" to WHAT IS ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY? (Chase 2002, xi). In producing English versions of essays in which Hadot quotes passages first penned in Latin and ancient Greek, Chase has typically translated into English Hadot's French translations of those passages, compared the result to the original Latin and Greek, and then made any necessary adjustments to his English translations of Hadot's French translations, in some cases consulting Hadot. As Chase acknowledges, though, the customary practice in translating from one language an essay in which the author quotes from texts written in other languages, is to substitute previously published English translations of those texts for the author's translations. Moreover, in this essay the differences between English translations of Hadot's French translations of Latin and ancient Greek passages and certain already published English translations of those passages are negligible, with perhaps one exception mentioned in note 33 below. Further, whereas Chase has translated essays in which Hadot sets out primarily to advance certain theses about ancient philosophy, here Hadot's argument concerns mainly Thoreau, and so much less weight rests on precisely how certain passages in Latin and ancient Greek should be translated.]



demonstrate, man has need of few things for reaching this result, and above all not luxury. "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life are not only indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind."⁴ It suffices to convince ourselves to remember the mode of life of Chinese, Hindu, Persian, and Greek philosophers, poor when it comes to external riches, rich when it comes to internal riches (*pauvres pour ce qui est de la richesse extérieure, riches pour ce qui est de la richesse intérieure*). These examples now are far from us, but Thoreau continues, "There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers."⁵ That is because for him, "To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, [...] ⁶ but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically."⁷ Thoreau takes advantage of the occasion to attack professors of philosophy, those great scholars and thinkers whose success is only a "courtier-like success, not kingly, not manly,"⁸ because in being content with theoretical discourse, they encourage men to keep living in an absurd manner. The life of these philosophers is pure conformity, and they let humanity degenerate in luxury. Thoreau, for his part, implicitly presents himself as the true philosopher, "He is not fed, sheltered, clothed, warmed, like his contemporaries."⁹ And he ends his discussion, certainly with a little irony, with a definition of the philosopher that may leave us flabbergasted: "How can a man be a philosopher and not maintain his vital heat by better methods than other men?"¹⁰ And to maintain his vital heat, man does not need to make great efforts. In order to meet his needs, Thoreau calculates that he works only six weeks a year: "To maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely [...]."¹¹ If Thoreau thus leaves to live in the woods, this is evidently not only for maintaining his vital heat in the most economical way possible, but it is that he wants "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."¹² "I wanted to live deep," he writes, "and suck out all the marrow of life [...]."¹³ And among these

3. Thoreau (1971, 13 [87]).

4. *Ibid.*, 14 [89].

5. *Ibid.*

6. [Hadot does not indicate his omission here of Thoreau's phrase "nor to found a school," though its French equivalent appears in Landré-Augier's translation.]

7. *Ibid.*, 14–15 [89]. [Readers familiar with Hadot's work will sense how vital it is for him that Thoreau makes these claims. Hadot is deeply concerned with philosophical praxis, focusing throughout his writings on "spiritual exercises," which he defines at one point as "practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive, as in contemplation, but which were all intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subject who practiced them" (Hadot 2002, 6). In the four existing English translations of Hadot's work, see especially the following: 1993 (18, 22, 81–82); 1995 (81–125, 264–76); 1998 (48–51, 86–98, 101ff., 207, 243–44, 255, 312–13); 2002 (179–220). This essay on Thoreau is to be understood in light of Hadot's emphasis on spiritual exercises. See note 48 below.]

8. [Thoreau (1971, 15 [89]).]

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 70 [167].

12. *Ibid.*, 90 [195].

13. [*Ibid.*, 91 [197].]



essential acts of life, there is the pleasure of perceiving the world through all his senses. It is to this that, in the woods, Thoreau directs the largest part of his time. One never grows tired of rereading the sensual beginning of the chapter titled "Solitude": "This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirtsleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, ... all the elements are unusually congenial to me. [...] Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled."¹⁴ In this chapter Thoreau wants, moreover, to show that, even alone, he is never alone, because he is aware (*conscience*) of communing with nature: "I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself." "The most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object [...]."¹⁵ Hence he perceives in the sound itself of raindrops, "an infinite and unaccountable friendliness."¹⁶ Each little pine needle treats him as a friend, and he feels something related to him in the most desolate and terrifying scenes of Nature. "Why should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky Way?"¹⁷ Thus, the perception of the world extends itself into a sort of cosmic consciousness.¹⁸

All that I have written until now bears a remarkable analogy to Epicurean philosophy, but also to certain aspects of Stoicism. Firstly, we find again in Epicureanism this critique of the manner in which men habitually live that we encountered in the first pages of WALDEN. "Human beings," says Lucretius, "never cease to labor vainly and fruitlessly, consuming their lives in groundless cares [...]."¹⁹ For the Epicureans of whom Cicero speaks, men are unhappy due to immense and hollow desires for riches, glory, and domination. "They are especially tormented when they realize, too late, that they pursued wealth or power or possessions or honour to no avail, and have failed to obtain any of the pleasures whose prospect drove them to endure a variety of great suffering."²⁰

Salvation (*Le Salut*) rests, for Epicurus, in the distinction between desires that are natural and necessary and that are related to the conservation of life; desires that are only natural, like sexual pleasure; and desires that are neither natural nor necessary, like [those for] wealth.²¹ Satisfaction of the first²² suffices, in principle, to assure man a stable pleasure and therefore happiness. This amounts to saying that,

14. *Ibid.*, 129 [253].

15. *Ibid.*, 131 [255].

16. [*Ibid.*, 132 [257]. Differing somewhat from Thoreau's original English quoted above, the French here means "a benevolence as infinite as it is inconceivable" (*une bienveillance aussi infinie qu'inconcevable*).]

17. *Ibid.*, 133 [259].

18. [See Hadot (1995, 266): "By 'cosmic consciousness,' we mean the consciousness that we are a part of the cosmos, and the consequent dilation of our self throughout the infinity of universal nature." In light of what Hadot understands cosmic consciousness to have been among ancient Stoics, it is significant that he notes at the beginning of the paragraph above that Thoreau claims to have wanted to live "deliberately." See, for example, Hadot (2002, 138): "Thanks to ['constantly renewed attention (*prosokhe-*) to oneself and to the present moment,' the Stoic] philosopher is always perfectly aware not only of what he is doing, but also of what he is thinking ... and of what he is—in other words, of his place within the cosmos."]

19. Lucretius (2001, 5.1430).

20. Cicero (2001, 1.18.60). [Here and in regard to the next two paragraphs, see Hadot (2002, 114–26).]



for Epicurus, philosophy consists essentially, as for Thoreau, in knowing how to conserve one's vital heat in a wiser way than other men. With a certain desire for provocation analogous to the one of Thoreau, one Epicurean sentence in effect declares: "The cry of the flesh: not to be hungry, not to be thirsty, not to be cold. Whoever enjoys this state and hopes to continue enjoying it can rival even God himself in happiness."²³ Happiness is, therefore, easy to attain: "Thanks be given to blessed nature," one Epicurean sentence says, "which makes necessary things easily achievable, and those things which are difficult to achieve unnecessary."²⁴ "Everything easy to procure is natural while everything difficult to obtain is superfluous."²⁵ The philosophical act consists, therefore, simply in contenting oneself in "not being hungry and not being cold." But no more than for Thoreau, philosophy for Epicurus consists not only in maintaining his vital heat in the most economical way possible. If Epicurean philosophy frees one from worry and useless desires, it is in order to return, like Thoreau, to the essential acts of life, to the pleasure of feeling and existing. If the one who is not hungry, who is not thirsty, and who is not cold can rival God himself in happiness, it is precisely because, like God, he is able to enjoy without hindrance the awareness (*la conscience*) of existence, but also the simple pleasure of perceiving the beauty of the world, a pleasure that is, for example, evoked in the following manner by Lucretius: "And so we see that the nature of the body is such that it needs few things ... those who follow their true nature never feel cheated of enjoyment²⁶ when they lie in friendly company on velvety turf near a running brook beneath the branches of a tall tree and provide their bodies with simple but agreeable refreshment, especially when the weather smiles and the season of the year spangles the green grass with flowers."²⁷ The Epicurean view on things, moreover, does not hesitate to thrust itself (*s'élançer*) even farther. It plunges itself into the infinity of worlds.²⁸ Thanks to the message of Epicurus, Lucretius cries out, "the walls of the world disport, and I see what happens throughout

21. Epicurus, "Principal Doctrines," §29; "Letter to Menoeceus," §127. [Hadot's point here is easier to understand when compared with what Epicurus writes in "Principal Doctrines": "Of the desires some are natural and necessary while others are natural but unnecessary. And there are desires that are neither natural nor necessary but arise from idle opinion." We use Eugene O'Connor's translations of Epicurus' "Principal Doctrines," "Letter to Menoeceus," and "Vatican Sayings" (1993).]

22. [That is, those which are natural and necessary.]

23. Epicurus, "Vatican Sayings," §33. [Since Hadot here does not quote Epicurus' exact statement, but says only what it "in effect" declares, these two lines in quotation marks above are translated directly from Hadot's French. O'Connor translates the original Greek as follows: "The voice of the flesh cries, 'Keep me from hunger, thirst, and cold!' The man who has these sureties and who expects he always will would rival even Zeus for happiness." Hadot uses the term "Dieu"—which means not "Zeus," but "God"—and the term "jouit," which translates as "enjoys." More important, his French contains an ambiguity concerning whether what matters is the fulfillment of the necessities or the enjoyment of their being fulfilled.]

24. [Hadot here gives his French translation of a line written in ancient Greek that is attributed to Ioannes Stobaeus and that Hadot says he draws from Arrighetti (1973, 567n.59, §240). We have simply translated into English Hadot's French translation, since we have not found an already [End Page 235] published English translation of the Greek, and since our English translation of Hadot's French translation accurately conveys the meaning of the Greek.]

25. Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus," §130.

26. [In Hadot's French translation here (*Il nous suffit, entre amis, étendus sur un tendre gazon ...*), there is no equivalent of Smith's phrase "those who follow their true nature." Hadot's and Smith's translations, though, are roughly equivalent to each other in conveying the main point expressed in Lucretius' original Latin.]

27. Lucretius (2001, 2.20–30). [See Hadot (1995, 217–37, 251–63; 2002, especially 194–98).]

28. [Hadot's French here is notably similar to his French translation of a phrase from Seneca which he quotes below. See our comment in note 33 below.]



the whole void. [... And] the earth does not prevent me from discerning all that happens down in the expanse of space beneath our feet. At this experience, [...] I am thrilled by a kind of divine ecstasy and quaking awe."²⁹ This presence of the cosmos is also found, as we have seen, by Thoreau, who does not forget that the sun which ripens the beans, illuminates an entire system of earths like ours,³⁰ and who does not feel alone, since, as he says, our planet is in the Milky Way.³¹

In choosing to settle in Walden, Thoreau has thus decided to live according to what we can call an Epicurean mode of life. I do not mean by that that he was conscious of the fact that this was precisely a matter involving an Epicurean mode of life, but I do mean that he found, perhaps spontaneously and unintentionally, perhaps under the influence of certain writings of the Ancients or of the Moderns, what Epicurus and his disciples had practiced and taught. One could say that in the same way that there exists a sort of universal Stoicism,³² there also exists a sort of universal Epicureanism, that is to say an attitude always possible for, and always open to, man, and that consists, through a certain discipline and reduction of desires, in returning pleasures mixed with sorrow and pain, to the simple and pure pleasure of existing.

However, there are in Thoreau certain nuances that do not correspond to the Epicurean attitude. First of all, Thoreau speaks of, and demands, solitude. But for the Epicurean, there is not true pleasure if it is not shared with friends: it is with Epicurean friends that Lucretius eats his frugal meal on the fresh spring grass. Moreover, for the Epicurean, there is no sentiment of communion and fusion with Nature, but only a contemplation of the infinity of worlds and of the eternity of immutable Nature. The sentiment of communion, of society with nature, is more of a Stoic sentiment. The Stoic, for whom all is in all (*tout est dans tout*), tries hard in effect to become aware of the fact that he is a part of the cosmic Whole (*du Tout cosmique*).³³ As Seneca says, the sage "penetrates the whole world"³⁴: *toti se inserens mundo*.

Also Stoic³⁵ in Thoreau, are both this joyous acceptance, professed throughout the pages of WALDEN, of nature and the universe,³⁶ in all their aspects, whether they are graceful, terrifying, or hideous, and the idea that each reality has its usefulness when one considers it from (*dans*) the perspective of totality: "The gentle rain which waters my beans and keeps me in the house to-day is not drear and melancholy, but good for me too ... if it should continue so long as to ... destroy the potatoes in the low lands, it would still be good for the grass

29. Lucretius (2001, 3.16–30). [See Hadot (1995, 238–63, 273; 2002, especially 198–211).]

30. Thoreau (1971, 10 [83]).

31. See note 16 above.

32. See Hadot (1992, 330–32). [In English, this is Hadot (1998, 310–12). See also Hadot (1995, 273; 2002, 278ff).]

33. See Marcus Aurelius, MEDITATIONS, 2.3.2, 4.2; 2.9. [See also Hadot (2002, 128–39).]

34. Seneca, (LETTERS TO LUCILIUS) EPISTLES, 66–92, Loeb, 76 (1996, 66.6). [Notably different from this English translation, Hadot's French translation of this phrase means "plunges into the totality of the world." (Michael Chase offers basically the same English translation of what presumably is Hadot's French translation of that phrase, in Hadot [1995, 252].)]

35. See Hadot (1992, 181–95). [In English, this is Hadot (1998, 164–79). See also Hadot (1995, 238–63, 273; 2002, especially 202–11).]

36. One thinks of the declaration of the transcendentalist Margaret Fuller: "I accept the Universe," cited by Landré-Augier (1967, 31).



on the uplands, and, being good for the grass, it would be good for me.”³⁷ “These beans have results which are not harvested by me. Do they not grow for woodchucks partly?”³⁸ It is the case that a harvest (*moisson*) or a crop (*récolte*) is never lost for the entire world. “The true husbandman will cease from anxiety ... and finish his labor with every day, relinquishing all claim to the produce of his fields, and sacrificing in his mind not only his first but his last fruits also.”³⁹

Finally, there is for Thoreau a deliberate intention to conserve his vital heat by means of manual labor,⁴⁰ even if it is moderate. And yet, for the Epicureans the problem does not seem to be posed (*s’être posé*). To my knowledge, they make no declaration for or against it. With the Stoics, it is completely otherwise. Not only does one find in them the example of Cleanthes, who worked by night to draw water in order to be able to follow the teachings of Zeno by day,⁴¹ but we even have a small text by the Roman Stoic Musonius, which explicitly advocates the union of the working of the earth with the philosophical life: “Pupils would seem to me rather benefited by not meeting with their teacher in the city nor listening to his formal lectures and discussions, but by seeing him at work in the fields, demonstrating by his own labor the lessons which philosophy inculcates – that one should endure hardships, and suffer the pains of labor with his own body, rather than depend upon another for sustenance.”⁴² And Musonius continues describing all the advantages of a philosophy lesson that would be given “living together in the country,” “living ... night and day” with the teacher.⁴³

We must not be surprised by this mixture of Stoic and Epicurean nuances that colors Thoreau’s conception of philosophy. Goethe, for example, spoke in his INTERVIEWS WITH FALK (*ENTRETIENS AVEC FALK*) of certain beings who, in their innate tendencies, are half Stoic and half Epicurean: he found nothing, he said, surprising in the fact that they accept at the same time the fundamental principles of the two systems and even that they try hard to bring them together as much as possible.⁴⁴ One could say of Goethe, moreover, that he himself was also half Stoic and half Epicurean: for example, he intensely wanted each present instant like a Stoic, and he enjoyed each as an Epicurean. There would be much to say on this phenomenon in the tradition of Western thought. I will offer (*retiendrai*) only one example that presents, moreover, some analogy with Thoreau. I will speak of the Rousseau of THE REVERIES OF THE SOLITARY WALKER, where, at the same time, one can find Epicurean sensualism, when the sound of the waves and the movement of the water is enough to make him feel his existence with pleasure (“What do we enjoy in such a situation? Nothing external to ourselves, nothing if not

37. Thoreau (1971, 131 [255]).

38. [*Ibid.*, 166 [307].]

39. *Ibid.*

40. [This sentence literally means: “There is in Thoreau a deliberate intention to owe the conservation of his vital heat to manual labor ...” (emphasis added). (Enfin, il y a Thoreau une volonté délibérée de devoir la conservation de sa chaleur vitale au travail manuel... .)]

41. Diogenes Laertius, 7.168.

42. Musonius Rufus, “What Means of Livelihood Is Appropriate for a Philosopher?” (1947, 83).

43. *Ibid.*, 85.

44. In von Biedermann (1910, 469).



ourselves and our own existence; as long as this state lasts, we are sufficient unto ourselves, like God"⁴⁵), but also the Stoic communion with nature, when he takes notice of the fact that he is himself a part of nature: "Through a delightful intoxication he loses himself in the immensity of this beautiful system with which he feels himself one;"⁴⁶ "I feel ecstasies and inexpressible raptures in blending, so to speak, into the system of beings and in making myself one with the whole of nature."⁴⁷ The experience recounted in WALDEN seems to me, therefore, extremely interesting for us because in choosing to live in the woods for some time, Thoreau wanted to perform (*faire*) a philosophical act, that is to say, to devote himself to a certain mode of philosophical life that included, at the same time, manual labor and poverty, but also opened up to him an immensely enlarged perception of the world. As we have seen, we better understand the nature of this decision and this choice of life if we compare it to the mode of philosophical life that was lived (*s'imposaient*)⁴⁸ by ancient philosophers.

Moreover, WALDEN itself, that is to say, the story that Thoreau tells of the way in which he lived these philosophical practices and exercises, is a philosophic discourse that, though admirable, seems to me of another order than philosophy itself, that is to say, other than the experience that Thoreau has really lived.⁴⁹ The true problem was not to write, but to live in the woods, to be capable of supporting such an experience, as difficult in its ascetic aspect –life in the woods– as in its contemplative aspect and, one could say, mystical aspect – this plunging into the heart of nature. In other words, the philosophical act transcends the literary work that expresses it; and this literary work cannot totally express what Thoreau has lived ... Hugo von Hoffmannsthal has written: "We can never capture in words something exactly as it is."⁵⁰ I think that one can detect in Thoreau a furtive allusion to the inexpressible character of the transfiguration of everyday life that operates in philosophy when he writes: "Perhaps the facts most astounding and most real are never communicated by man to man. The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched."⁵¹

© Editions Albin Michel, S. A., Paris 2002. In French, this essay was published as "Il y a de nos jours des professeurs de philosophie, mais pas de philosophes,"

45. Rousseau (2000, 46).

46. *Ibid.*, 59.

47. *Ibid.*, 61.

48. ["S'imposaient" literally means "self-imposed," but the idea here is that both Thoreau and ancient philosophers assiduously brought practice into accordance with theory, living out their beliefs.]

49. [This point ties into a central theme in Hadot's work. See especially Hadot (1993, 75–76, 87–88; 1995, 163, 264–76; 1998, 5, 35–36, 81–82; 2002, 4–6, 23, 38, 46, 49, 55ff., 71–72, 77, 90, 101, 107, 142, 157, 220, 254, 259ff., 272ff.; 275): "Why not define the philosopher not as a professor or a writer who develops a philosophical discourse, but, in accordance with the concept which was constant in antiquity, as a person who leads a philosophical life? Shouldn't we revise the habitual use of the word "philosopher" (which usually refers only to the theoretician) so that it applies to the person who practices philosophy, just as Christians can practice Christianity without being theorists or theologians? ... I have tried to show, among other things, that philosophical practice is relatively independent from philosophical discourse."]

50. von Hoffmannsthal (1992, 223).

51. Thoreau (1971, 216–17 [379]).

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originally in HENRY D. THOREAU, ed. Michel Granger (Paris: L'Herne, 1994): 188-94, and later in *EXERCICES SPIRITUELS ET PHILOSOPHIE ANTIQUE*, new edition, revised and expanded (Paris: A. Michel, 2002): 333-42.

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2007

August 3: An OP-ED piece surfaced in the New York Times, by David Brooks, in which Thoreau was granted a one-liner. It was entitled “Being Old, Then And Now” and was about the way we distance ourselves from older people by treating them with offhand “toleration.” Brooks offered a number of licit examples, but what I am here objecting to is that one of the sound bytes that he rang in along the way was Thoreau’s comment in WALDEN that the young have little to learn from the old:

WALDEN: When we consider what, to use the words of the catechism, is the chief end of man, and what are the true necessities and means of life, it appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. Yet they honestly think there is no choice left. But alert and healthy natures remember that the sun rose clear. It is never too late to give up our prejudices. No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof. What every body echoes or in silence passes by as true to-day may turn out to be falsehood to-morrow, mere smoke of opinion, which some had trusted for a cloud that would sprinkle fertilizing rain on their fields. What old people say you cannot do you try and find that you can. Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new. Old people did not know enough once, perchance, to fetch fresh fuel to keep the fire a-going; new people put a little dry wood under a pot, and are whirled round the globe with the speed of birds, in a way to kill old people, as the phrase is. Age is no better, hardly so well, qualified for an instructor as youth, for it has not profited so much as it has lost. One may almost doubt if the wisest man has learned any thing of absolute value by living. Practically, the old have no very important advice to give the young, their own experience has been so partial, and their lives have been such miserable failures, for private reasons, as they must believe; and it may be that they have some faith left which belies that experience, and they are only less young than they were. I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me any thing, to the purpose. Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me; but it does not avail me that they have tried it. If I have any experience which I think valuable, I am sure to reflect that this my Mentors said nothing about.

He made it seem as if Thoreau's point had been that we don't need to pay attention to our elders because we've already understood and processed and dealt with anything these geezers might be able to offer. That is to say, in the pages of the Times Brooks made Thoreau seem to have been affirming the superior wisdom of youngsters — and then moved directly along as if Thoreau's ideas were so ridiculous they needed only to be cited in order to be dismissed.

That would be, however, a tendentious misreading of Thoreau's paragraph. In no sense were younger people being praised as Brooks is so dismissively suggesting. What Thoreau offers is not that elders have endured many years without acquiring much insight into life, but that his readers were likely to follow such a sad trajectory, gaining in years but failing to improve in insight. What he offers amounts to "We'd better start paying attention and start paying attention **now**, or our own experience of life is going to be quite as limited." That is to say, Thoreau's remark is a witty reaffirmation of the unexceptionable remark "Too soon we get old, too late we get smart."

So I say, David Brooks shame on you! — if I could give you an assignment, it would be to reread WALDEN and this time understand it.



David "Shoot from the Hip" Brooks

To provide a superior example of how one might more usefully process the above paragraph about wisdom and foolishness, youth and age, I will offer the following material from Professor [Pierre Hadot](#)'s THE VEIL OF ISIS: AN ESSAY ON THE HISTORY OF THE IDEA OF NATURE (translation by Michael Chase; Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2006, pages 174-5):

If the "young" knew better than the "old," might not the old be the moderns? Giordano Bruno [SUPPER OF ASHES] did not hesitate to make this affirmation: "We [i.e., we who are present at this moment] are older and more advanced in age than our predecessors." To be a modern, if we consider the history of mankind to be like that of a human being who learns and instructs himself, is to be old; and to be an ancient is to be young. The ancients were young by virtue of their inexperience, but also by virtue of the freshness of their intuitions. The moderns are old because they have profited from the groping and the experience of the ancients. The moderns, however, having inherited the work of successive generations, must not let themselves be impressed by the so-called authority of the so-called ancients, who were in fact only young beginners. [Jules]



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Michelet takes up this idea in an admirable passage from his JOURNAL (March 30, 1842), so that he, too, can rehabilitate the ancients: "One could, moreover, maintain that we are the elders. Who is older, Virgil or Homer? In the latter, one senses a sap of eternal youth; in Virgil, on the contrary, the world is old and melancholy. New ideas constantly come to rejuvenate the world; each day it is more powerful, more complex, and more varied. Yet antiquity is simpler, and it contains ideas in a concentrated state, or the state of an elixir."

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"It's all now you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."

- Remark by character "Garin Stevens"
in William Faulkner's INTRUDER IN THE DUST



Prepared: August 13, 2013

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