

COOPER VS HADOT: ON THE NATURE OF HELLENISTIC THERAPEUTIC PHILOSOPHY

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Even though it is widely accepted that ancient philosophy is practiced as a way of life with the aim of achieving human flourishing, there is controversy about the nature of its practice. This paper pits two opposing views about the conduct of ancient philosophy. Siding with Hadot and against Cooper, I will argue in this essay that there is insufficient ground to constrain ancient philosophy to philosophical discourse.

Key Words: Stoicism, Therapeutic Philosophy, Philosophy as a Way of Life

1 INTRODUCTION

Pierre Hadot argues that there is a profound misunderstanding about the essence of ancient Greek philosophy with its representation as dedicated to theoretical and philosophical discourse since the Greeks' quest for wisdom involves a process of transformation of one's way of being and living (Hadot, 1995, 2002). Based on his review of ancient texts, he offers his thesis about the distinctiveness in the life of Hellenistic philosophers and their practices of philosophy which cannot be conducted outside of schools organized to educate those who have chosen a way of life unique to the doctrines being taught by the masters (Hadot, 2002, p.4,99). According to Hadot, these teachings demand the students to adopt a different life style geared toward a transformation of their worldview, the acquisition of new knowledge and the elimination of false beliefs. To that extent, the Epicurean, Stoic and Sceptic's philosophical schools all have the aim of achieving a good life for their followers through specific *therapeutic spiritual exercises* which are characterized by practices in discursive dialogue, meditation, contemplation as well as physical and dietary regimes (Hadot, 2002, p.6). If ancient philosophy is the search for wisdom and since for Hadot wisdom is a certain way of life, then to be a philosopher is to choose a school with a certain type of wisdom or way of life (Hadot, 2002, p.102). Hadot wants to draw the distinction between ancient

philosophy which he associates with self-training for a certain way of life and philosophical discourse which is used to discuss and train others (Hadot, 2002, p.138-9).

This view is challenged by John Cooper in his book *Pursuits of Wisdom*. Cooper objects to Hadot's claim that choice of life and mental exercises beyond dialectic discourses are necessary in the conduct of ancient philosophy (Cooper, 2012, p.13-23). He rejects Hadot's claim of the need for *existential option* in ancient philosophy since "*the only existential option involved in the basic commitment to being a philosopher, to living on the basis of philosophical reason*" (Cooper, 2012, p.18-19). In other words, he claims that Hadot's distinction between philosophy and philosophical discourse is unwarranted. This controversy has ramification in so far as we wish to understand the aim and approach in Hellenistic philosophy and secondarily to determine those elements which are common and different to the conduct of modern philosophy. Although Hadot's argument for the need of existential choice for ancient philosophers to complement philosophical discourse could not be entirely supported from evidence of Hellenistic extant texts, I will attempt to show in this paper that Cooper's criticism of Hadot has a number of weaknesses which can be challenged.

My thesis is that although knowledge acquired through philosophical discourse is *necessary* in ancient philosophy, it is not *sufficient* for the individual transformation which accompanies the choice of a way of life as required by the Hellenistic philosophical schools. This essay will have three parts. In the first part, I will reconstruct Cooper's argument which stipulates, in contrast with Hadot's thesis, that the essence of Hellenistic philosophy is simply the complete devotion to the practice of philosophical discourse in the form of study and discussion. Then, in the second part, I will show that Cooper's thesis does not have enough testimonial support and may also fail the sufficiency criteria. In their respective books, Hadot and Cooper include Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics and Epicurean schools, however in this essay I will limit my remarks to Stoicism as being representative for the review of the controversy with limited reference to Epicureanism. I will also offer a possible objection from Cooper to my argument before concluding.

2 THE HELLENISTIC THERAPEUTIC PHILOSOPHY

Hellenistic philosophy aims at acquiring wisdom through change in value judgments. In that sense is therapeutic (Hadot, 2002, p.102). It is widely accepted that both Epicureanism and Stoicism target human cognition as the base for the acquisition of knowledge, the elimination of false beliefs and the acquisition human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). Human cognition is also seen as the pathway to attaining a perfect peace of mind. Nussbaum states that the Hellenistic philosophical schools all "conceived philosophy as a way of addressing the most painful problems of human life, and the practice of philosophy not as a detached intellectual technique but an art of dealing with human

misery” (Nussbaum, 1994, p.3-4). In treating philosophy as means to heal the mind from reasoning errors, similar to medicine as means to cure the body, she also asserts that these schools have adopted a therapeutic approach to philosophy (Nussbaum, 1994, p.13-16). This analogy finds support in the fact that both therapeutic philosophy and medicine consider diagnostic and treatment as essential steps in their process for cure of human suffering and bodily sickness respectively. For the Stoics, philosophy is the practice of acquiring virtues which enable us to understand the world and guide human conduct (Aetius I, Preface 2 [26A], in Long and Sedley, 1987). One of the core virtue in stoicism is moderation or temperance, which involves the control of passions working against reason: “The Stoics say that passion is impulse which is excessive and disobedient to the dictates of reason” (Stobaeus 2.88 *SVF*3.378 [65A] in Long and Sedley, 1987). Here I follow with Long who argues that although control of the passion is a basic principle in Greek ethics, the stoics took particular care in identifying passion as weak opinion and the source of unhappiness (Long and Sedley, 1987, p.419-420). To that extent, fundamental to stoicism is the emphasis on the strength of will and character resulting from rigorous rhetorical and psychological training.

However, philosophers offer different views on the nature or more specifically the features of the Hellenistic therapeutic philosophy. On the one hand, Hadot argues that in order to be an Epicurean or Stoic philosopher in ancient Greece or Rome, one has to choose a way of life proposed by the respective schools and practice under the guidance of teachers a number of spiritual exercises, which include physical, dietary, discursive and meditative elements aimed at modifying our intellectual and spiritual outlook. On the other hand, Cooper dismisses any activities which are not part of the dialectic and philosophical discourse and considers them to be either secondary in nature or more likely influenced by religious impetus which are entirely non-philosophical (Cooper, 2012, p.22). What is at stake in this debate is to settle on the likely conduct of Hellenistic philosophy and its distinctiveness from today’s philosophical practice.

3 COOPER’S THESIS

Cooper argues that ancient philosophy from Socrates to the Hellenistic period is built from the combination of three fundamental assumptions which yield the ultimate power of reasoning and move us into action (Cooper, 2012, p.12):

- (P1) Human reason and its power of inquiry can motivate action (Cooper, 2012, p.1).
- (P2) Knowledge of truth is possible through reason (Cooper, 2012, p.12).
- (P3) Power of knowledge and truth is capable of ruling a person (Cooper, 2012, p.13-14).

- (C1) Therefore, knowledge through reason is *necessary* and *sufficient* for human actions and choice of life.
- (P4) Unlike today's practice, ancient philosophy contains a comprehensive and integrated system of thought including physics, logic and ethics (Cooper, 2012, p.15).
- (C2) Therefore, the *psychological gap* which exists today in moral philosophy as guidance to a good life is due to the lack of a *unified philosophical discourse*, and not because of missing spiritual exercises (Cooper, 2012, p.15).

Cooper rejects Hadot's view that a choice of a way of life, which encompasses a diverse set of mental exercises, precedes philosophical discourse. He argues that for the Greek Stoics, the clear understanding of the Stoic's principles through philosophical argumentation and discourse would determine their way of life. To that extent, he reckons that the later Roman Stoic texts, with their emphasis on exhortation and appeal to imagination rather than reasoning, cannot be admitted as true representation of ancient Hellenistic philosophy (Cooper, 2012, p.214-225). In the next section, I will lay out my arguments against Cooper's thesis based on two objections related to *testimonial support* and *sufficiency test*.

4 THE TESTIMONIAL OBJECTION

From a Stoic's perspective, premises (P1) and (P2) of Cooper's argument are relatively uncontroversial. According to the Stoics, human's soul is distinctive from other living species due to reason, which gives us the ability to judge impressions derived from the senses and enables us to develop cognitive distance and withhold assent to false beliefs (Aetius 4.21.I-4 [53H1] in Long and Sedley, 1987). However, I believe that (P3) could be challenged. Cooper based this premise on Plato's *Protagoras* in which Socrates posits that knowledge of the good and bad commands power on humans and can force us to act accordingly. But Socrates also cautions that this view may not hold for the majority who are unwilling to follow reason as guidance for their moral actions (Plato, *Protagoras* 352c-d). So what works for the Stoic sage, defined as a person who had attained moral and intellectual perfection (Baltzly, 2018), may not apply to all. My aim is to show that Cooper's (C1) conclusion is overextended, which could undermine his (C2) conclusion.

I am basing my first objection on the interpretation of Stoic's text fragments in Long and Sedley. Contrary to Cooper's view, I believe that the Stoics do not rely entirely on philosophical discourse for the determination of a way of life. By "comparing philosophy to a living being, likening logic, ethics and physics to the bones, flesh and soul respectively", they gave equal weighting to the practice of the three fields (Diogenes Laertius 7.39-41 [26B] in Long and Sedley, 1987). This view is supported by Sharpe who interpreted Hadot's thesis as implying that the practice of physics equates to the understanding

about the world and our relation within it, the practice of ethics to the use of reason to guide our actions with others, and the practice of logic to train our judgments and assents (Sharpe, 2014, p.381). So no priority could be assigned to dialectic discourse to the exclusion of other activities which are part of a way of life for ancient philosophers in their quest for wisdom: “The Stoics said that wisdom is scientific knowledge of the divine and the human, and that philosophy is the practice of expertise in utility with virtue being the highest utility. For that reason philosophy has three parts: physics is practiced to investigate the world, ethics is our engagement with human life and logic our engagement with discourse” (Aetius I, Preface 2 *SVF* 2.35 [26A] Long and Sedley, 1987).

By referring to Plato writings, we can also find evidence for the practice of philosophy which he characterized as the daily discipline of study, memorization and reasoning not necessarily only by oneself but also as part of the extended discourse between teacher and student (Plato, *Letter 7*, 340d-341d). In other words, the choice of a philosophical school and all related activities would likely be required. Support to the view about the limitations of dialectic discourse and arguments is also mentioned by Aristotle as he insisted on the need for building habits and proper upbringings (Aristotle, E.N. X9.1179b5-35). So in order for the power of knowledge and truth to rule a person, a significant amount of training under the guidance of a master is required.

In addition, Cooper’s rejection of Roman Stoic texts as evidential support to ancient way of life is not widely accepted. Some philosophers argue for their inclusion in order to bridge the gap between the craft (*technē*) and science (*epistēmē*) in philosophy (Braicovich, 2015, p.55). Others argue that to overlook Epictetus and Seneca as part of our investigation into Stoicism would be detrimental to our understanding of their therapeutic practice (Nussbaum, 1994, p.337). Sharpe also argues that Epictetus’s *Encheiridion*, which precedes Seneca, contains ample reference to spiritual exercises as guidance to his students to supplement the study of Chrisippus texts (Sharpe, 2014, p.378-384). The moral part of Stoicism contains heavy emphasis on mental training and exercises to control desires and mental anguish: “There are three topics in which the would-be honorable and good man needs to have been trained: that of desires and aversions, that of impulsions and repulsions and that of infallibility and uncarelessness” (Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.2.I-5 [56 C] Long and Sedley, 1987).

In summary, I believe that Cooper provided insufficient evidence to support his exclusion of Roman Stoic texts from our consideration for Stoicism’s way of life against the opinions of other contemporary philosophers. Moreover, the Socratic and Aristotelian’s traditions do not reject activities outside of philosophical discourse as part of their education either.

5 THE SUFFICIENCY OBJECTION

Cooper's thesis is based on the assumption that knowledge of the truth through reasoning is sufficiently powerful to move us into action (P3). Whereas it is not uncontroversial that reasoning is the necessary step for the motivation to act, I would argue that reason alone is insufficient to lead to action. I also submit that the authority of reason over passions is limited, and that reasoning also depends on the force of habit and experience, which are derived from activities that have been chosen in advance. I follow Sellars who argues that Socrates and the early Stoics, employing the medical analogy, consider "philosophy as a cure for the mind which requires a grasp of complex philosophical doctrine and a period of training designed to digest that doctrine", which implies the practice of psychological exercises aimed at eradicating false beliefs (Sellars, 2003, 2014). So the admission of some of Hadot's spiritual exercises does not undermine the importance of dialectic in the early Stoics' practice. It could also be argued that the Roman Stoics have effectively articulated the solutions to the cognitive and psychological gap identified by Cooper in our interpretation of the early Stoic fragments (Braicovich, 2015, p.54-55).

Support to the view that Hellenistic philosophy extends beyond dialectic discourse is also found in the argument that the ancient philosophical education includes biographical study of the sayings or writings of the masters (Sellars, 2003, p.15-32). The confluence of the philosopher's *bios* with his writings exemplifies the goal of ancient philosophy as transformation of character rather than a purely intellectual undertaking (Sellars, 2003, p.23). And if we agree with this assessment, then it would be difficult to limit a philosopher's way of life to philosophical discourse on the doctrines under study.

Finally, if we accept that Hellenistic philosophy is principally therapeutic in nature, then its method of treatment for the ills of the mind and human sufferings needs to be investigated. Can this therapy be restricted to philosophical discourse? Or does it require additional mental and physical activities which cut deeper into our psychology? Hadot argues that philosophical discourse and philosophical life are inseparable, and this fact provides the key distinction between ancient philosophers and the sophists who teach rhetoric without necessarily submitting their life to the rigors of the moral principles (Hadot, 2002, p.174).

To conduct therapeutic philosophy is to uncover the unconscious human motivations and beliefs. And while philosophical arguments could be used as the key for the treatment of false beliefs, it may be insufficient to address the complexity of human psychology (Nussbaum, 1994, p.490). The Hellenistic techniques such as memorization, visualization and daily introspection tackle the cognitive complexity in the context of the environment in which the person lives. The distinction between philosophical discourse and mental introspection may not be straightforward but are both required in the search for wisdom.

6 THE CONFUSION BETWEEN PHILOSOPHICAL WAY OF LIFE AND RELIGIOUS WAY OF LIFE

Cooper's counter-argument to the above objections is that he is not entirely against the inclusion of Hadot's spiritual exercises in the context of the daily activities of ancient philosophers which comprise of the study of logic, physics and ethics (Cooper, 2012, p.402-403). What Cooper insists is that we clearly distinguish the philosophical activities from those that have religious content. Cooper argues that meditation, memorization, confession and ascetic practices constitute religious way of life, and should not be confused them with philosophical way of life. He maintains that religious way of life has to be anchored on philosophical discourse and arguments.

I do not disagree with Cooper's objection. The distinctiveness of the philosophical discourse, along with its agreed rules and methods, is well entrenched in all the philosophical schools from ancient time to today. The fact that theology also embraces the same techniques in its teachings has led to some confusion between the fields of philosophical and religious studies. However, the recognition of this possible overlap should not prevent us from accepting that human psychology is a complex endeavor. In fact, it should also be recognized that Stoicism is partly anchored on theogony as expressed by their view of reason as derived from the mind of a pervasive and commanding nature (Cicero, *On the nature of the gods* [54B], in Long and Sedley, 1987). So the distinction between ancient philosophy and theology has never been so clear cut as Cooper has argued. Moreover, as long as ethics is considered a key field of study in philosophy, which is certainly the case in ancient Greek, then the possibility for overlap between theological and philosophical moral teachings is bound to occur.

I follow Sellars who argues that ancient philosophy cannot be limited to spiritual exercises, but this should not prevent the inclusion of mental exercises in their practice (Sellars, 2014, p.1180). I believe that the controversy can be overcome by substituting the religiously laden word *spiritual* with the more scientific terminology of *psychological* to reflect the mental exercises in the philosophical practice. Modern philosophy is often segregated from religious studies to highlight the importance of the analytical approach to philosophical discourse. This has not prevented the ongoing debate within philosophical circles on the merits of the continental approach with its emphasis on existential and phenomenological impetus versus the logical and scientific orientation of the analytical schools. It is not obvious to me that either approach is better and I would argue that both are needed to address the complexity of the problems in human psychology.

7 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have examined Cooper's objection to Hadot's interpretation of Hellenistic way of life. I have argued that his thesis lacks philological evi-

dence, and that his interpretation of Stoic practice is too restrictive. My argument is that if we view Hellenistic philosophy as therapeutic in nature, then knowledge acquired through philosophical discourse, although necessary, is not sufficient for the individual transformation that accompanies the choice of a way of life. Complementary mental activities such as meditation, memorization and visualization are required to facilitate the cognitive and psychological conversion needed to correct false beliefs. The essence of philosophical discourse and arguments in ancient philosophy should be recognized, but not to the exclusion of other spiritual exercises that have been proven effective by later Roman Stoics. This conclusion leaves an open question for modern practice, namely, how should we view the psychological gap between dialectic and way of life for today's philosophers? Is the choice of a way of life for modern philosophers determined by their holistic worldview guided by intellectual exercises, or by mental exhortation following certain dogmas?

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