

Philosophical conversion to another life.
Epistrophè, metanoia, alethurgy and philosophy
as a way of living otherwise

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Abstract: In this article, I will first analyse Hadot's conception of conversion. I will argue that this notion is the core of his conception of philosophy as a way of life. I will continue by showing that conversion is the common effect of all philosophical exercises that aim to transform the individual's form of being, including the «techniques» of the self (the care of the self, *parresia*, *alethurgy*) investigated by Foucault in his dialogue with Hadot. Finally, I will demonstrate the presence of conversion in certain of the authors that Hadot holds up as examples of modern forms of philosophy as a way of life. My aim is to show that a form of conversion is indeed at stake in a typically modern (non-religious) field of philosophy: the field of utopian thought.

Keywords: Form of life; utopia; Hadot; Foucault; philosophy as a way of life.

1. One of the most important thesis stressed by Pierre Hadot consists in the fact that the inner structure of modern thought conceived as a way of life bears some similarities to the paradigms of ancient thought. Our questions are the following ones: can philosophy be a way of life in modernity and in our contemporary world? Are there certain forms of philosophy in modernity that constitute a way of life? Is the conception of conversion useful to approach philosophy as a way of life?

By quoting Philo of Alexandria and by stressing how the practices of knowledge in ancient philosophy (even those less obviously connected to moral and ethical questions,

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such as the physical sciences) belong to a conception of citizenship and to a form of living, Hadot clarifies the main characteristics of this tradition:

During this period, philosophy was a way of life. This is not only to say that it was a specific type of moral conduct; we can easily see the role played from Philo by the contemplation of nature. Rather, it means that philosophy was a mode of existing-in-the-world, which had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual's life. (HADOT 1995 265)

He pushes himself to affirm that the very word, 'philosophy' – *philo-sophia*, as 'love of wisdom' – provided the best example of this conception. In this sense, philosophy as a way of life constitutes the specific approach to philosophy characterized by an «exercise and effort to achieve wisdom, and its goal, wisdom itself» (Hadot 1995: 265). With this said, what is crucial is how we understand the term 'wisdom':

Philosophy thus took on the form of an exercise of the thought, will, and the totality of one's being, the goal of which was to achieve a state practically inaccessible to mankind: wisdom. Philosophy was a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual's way of being.

Thus, philosophy was a way of life, both in its exercise and effort to achieve wisdom, and in its goal, wisdom itself. For real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us «be» in a different way. (HADOT 1995: 265)

Two things should be stressed here: the tension that characterizes philosophy as a way of life is also implied in the mere form of thinking. Thought is in this case not separate from life. It is an exercise, an 'effort' addressed to transforming life and the individual's way of being. At the heart of this conception of philosophy we therefore find the notion of conversion. In other words, we can imagine philosophy as a way of life without referring to the practice of meditation, but not without this central aim, which is to achieve a form of being otherwise. A second point worth stressing is the language used by Hadot, which from the modern perspective is cloaked in religious meaning: terms like «spiritual progress» and «radical conversion» seem to belong to religion rather than philosophy. Hadot seems to project onto the whole of antiquity practices that belong to a decidedly religious way of life.

On the other hand, Hadot explicitly clarifies how his conception of philosophy as a way of life was suspended in the 'religious' Middle Age: in this sense, Hadot explains

that with the rise of Scholasticism, philosophy as a way of life began to disappear. The application of Aristotelian logic to theology in the medieval universities and a growing conception of philosophy as a servant of theology made the previous identification of philosophy with a practice of life impossible everywhere but in the monasteries¹. What characterizes Hadot's position is the idea that, following the Medieval period, philosophy seemed to recover some of its ancient forms – forms that characterized it as a way of life and that included meditation, confession, and spiritual exercises.

Although it is easy to demonstrate how modernity contains various texts that recover and recall ancient practices of writing, notions such as 'spiritual exercise' are susceptible to the first objection: it is a notion invented in modernity (in particular, in the context of the Counter-Reformation), created by the Jesuits to attain religious conversion. This practice aims to a truth that is a Christian truth and a true life that is a 'true' life in Christ².

A further objection to Hadot is the notion that philosophy as a way of life could not have existed after the Middle Ages. Modern forms of reason and the gap between knowledge and moral practice created by Descartes and the epistemological turn of the sixteenth century precluded the possibility of philosophy as a form of life in the Modern era. The examples and studies put forth by Hadot concerning modern authors as representatives of philosophers who approached philosophy as a way of life overlook this fact and are for this reason questionable.

The claim is therefore that two forms of unjustified projection undermine Hadot's assumption that philosophy as a way of life was present in modernity: on the one hand, the projection onto modernity of the ancient notion of philosophy as an "effort" and an "exercise", and on the other hand the projection onto antiquity of key notions belonging to the field of religion, such as 'conversion'. More concretely, it is apparently charged that Hadot's approach contains a vicious circle: it infuses modernity with features that belonged squarely to antiquity and then links the former to a conception of antiquity that is infused with features that belonged exclusively to the modern Christian era.

If a notion like 'spiritual exercise' is too simple to be conflated with the corresponding modern (or modern-religious) conception, and if Hadot's backdating of 'spirituality' is in fact unjustified, the notion of 'conversion' would seem to be able to break the supposed

1 Cf. HADOT 1995: 270.

2 Cf. HADOT 1995: 270.

vicious circle³. For those influenced by religious traditions, ‘conversion’ is likely to be taken to belong necessarily to the religious field: despite this, Hadot shows that conversion belongs to the ancient conception of philosophy and was in fact inherited by religious, Christian traditions and by modern authors who treated philosophy as a way of life. On Hadot’s account, conversion emerges as the aim of a practice that seeks to «to transform the whole of the individuals’ life». It therefore emerges as the true core of philosophy as a way of life, much more so than in other practices related to ‘spirituality’. In this case, in order to demonstrate the presence, or the possibility, throughout the history of modern thought, of a modern version of philosophy as a way of life, we should investigate the presence of forms of philosophical (but not necessarily religious) conversion.

Our opening question – can philosophy be a way of life in modernity and in our contemporary world? – is thus really a question of whether modern philosophy, or at least certain modern philosophical conceptions, involves an attempt to reach ‘conversion’, an attempt «to transform the whole of the individuals’ life». If this connection exists, then alongside the history of philosophy as a way of life there ought to be a history of practices for transforming one’s life, one in which religious forms of conversion are but a moment, a specific field of the relevant practice. Likewise, the other objection made against Hadot – that he infuses religious modernity with what it is not, and in particular with a concept of ‘spiritual exercise’ – can be relativized to the point of vanishing: this is because certain religious notions used by Hadot to characterize philosophy as a way of life also characterize previous forms of philosophical practice that were inherited by religion. In this case, we should stress the word ‘exercise’ more than the word ‘spiritual’⁴.

2. In the entry on ‘Conversion’ in the *Encyclopedia Universalis*, written by Pierre Hadot and then included in the collection *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*⁵ Hadot clarifies his aim of approaching conversion as a «changement into a mental order,

3 I agree in part with Cooper (COOPER 2002: 20) in this regard.

4 I agree in this sense with Cooper’s claim that spiritual exercises «could have, at most a secondary and very derivative function in the philosophical life during the heyday of ancient philosophy» (COOPER 2002: 22).

5 Cf. HADOT 2002: 223-235. Unfortunately, this text does not appear in the English edition of these essays. The translations from the French are mine.

that can consist of a simple modification of an opinion until a complete transformation of the personality» (HADOT 2002: 223). He adds that the word ‘conversion’, through the Latin word ‘*conversio*’ (etymologically connected to the verb ‘*convertere*’ and literally meaning ‘to turn over’), corresponds to the Greek words ‘*epistrophè*’ and ‘*metanoia*’. Whereas the first means ‘change of orientation’ and implies a ‘return to the origin’, the second corresponds to ‘change of thought’ and implies transformation and revival. In this text, Hadot tries to approach conversion from the different points of view – and the different legacies – in which it has historically developed⁶. The centrality of this notion (and thus of this text) to understanding Hadot’s philosophical approach is made clear by what Hadot says at a point where he departs from his usual philological moderation: in conversion, we mirror the «irreducible ambiguity of human reality» (HADOT 2002: 224). What is clearly at stake is not only a religious or philosophical phenomenon but what this phenomenon reveals about the ontological form of the human being: conversion, its historical persistence, as well as the heterogeneity of its legacy, reveals a central feature of what it is to be a human being: «the freedom of the human being, able to transform himself completely, by reinterpreting his past and his future» (HADOT 2002: 224) – a freedom to transform his reality, as his own being, when he confronts forces external to himself. For this reason,

we can say that the idea of conversion represents one of the fundamental notions of western consciousness: indeed, we can represent to ourselves the whole history of the West as a constantly renewed effort to improve the techniques of «conversion», that is, the techniques addressed to transform the human reality, both by taking it back to its original essence (conversion-return), and by modifying it completely (conversion-changement). (HADOT 2002: 224)

Hadot shows that conversion appears more in the political field in antiquity than in religious contexts. In the Greek context, the phenomenon appears to be connected to politics: conversion here involves bringing an adversary to change his opinion. Consequently, philosophical conversion – in particular Platonic conversion – has politics, the transformation of the city, as its main goal. To change the city is to transform its

⁶ For Hadot, these «historical forms of conversion» include pre-Christian antiquity, the connection between Judaism and Christianity, and those developments listed in a final paragraph about missions, religious wars and awakening. The «different aspects of the phenomenon» consist of psychophysiological, sociological, religious and philosophical aspects.

citizens, however, and the only citizen who is truly able to transform himself is the philosopher. Even the theory of the platonic Good, towards which the soul must be turned, belongs to a theory of conversion: for Plato, philosophy is the art of turning the individual soul towards the Good. As a consequence, only if a city is governed by philosophers can it turn, or be converted, to the Good.

Departing from the political application of the phenomenon that we find in Plato, conversion in Stoicism, Epicureanism and Neoplatonism takes the form of a practice of individual transformation. Here, the aim is the transformation not of the city but of the soul and the habits of the individual⁷. Through philosophical exercises such as meditation, the individual gains an opportunity to discover his own nature, to come back to himself (as is the case in conversion as *epistrophé*), and to disrupt his present form of being (as is the case in conversion as *metanoia*)⁸.

The Judeo-Christian approach to conversion – where the structure is similar to *epistrophé* and *metanoia* – consists on the one hand in faith in the word of God and on the other in fulfilment of the prophecies, and thus in the overlapping of philosophical and religious approaches. There are many examples of this overlapping in late antiquity, yet Hadot clarifies how the phenomenon of conversion assumes a distinct form in the fields of religion and philosophy, even if both manifestations have the same structure. From this perspective, we face two different possibilities: conversion can take either a meta-religious or a meta-philosophical form. Given its malleability, it is a phenomenon that we find in different civilizations which reveals its ontologically *open* structure as constitutive of the human being. Or, as some critics of Hadot argue, religious forms of conversion had a direct influence on its philosophical forms – as was the case with certain Stoic practices, which were directly influenced by early Christianity. It is also possible to suppose, in some cases, that religious and philosophical forms were combined, for instance in the species of conversion that we encounter in the Old Testament, which was the direct result

7 Cf. HADOT 2002: 226.

8 It is important to stress that Hadot dedicated a report at the *Congrès de philosophie de Bruxelles* to this question in 1953: cf. HADOT 1953. «Different responses to an identical aspiration, *metanoia* and *epistrophe* crossed paths historically and form two interacting poles in human consciousness» (ivi; transl. by A. Irvine).

of the influence of ancient Hellenism on Judaeo-Hellenistic culture.⁹ Hadot does not explicitly approach the problem of the possibly mixed origin of this phenomenon, and in this sense we can argue hypothetically, from a genealogical point of view – as is sometimes employed in the history of the language – for the presence of a primeval form of this phenomenon whose roots lie in the struggles of not-yet-human beings to live and to be otherwise¹⁰.

Hadot remarks on other aspects of this phenomenon as it appears in modernity in the context of the Reformation, as a return to a pure mode of Christian life. Among its sociological aspects, Hadot also stresses the forms of ‘epidemic’ conversion. What captures our attention, however, are Hadot’s remarks about the religious and philosophical aspects of the phenomenon: in particular, the form by which religious conversion repeats the original experience of religion. In other words, conversion seems to belong to all institutionalised religious practices via repetition of the original event that gives life to that particular religious experience. At the same time, it takes the form of a «new creation», one that is free but must correspond to the will of God¹¹. It is when we confront the philosophical aspect of conversion that Hadot clarifies, once more, the importance of this phenomenon for the whole of Western philosophy, and especially for philosophy conceived in its connection with life. The ‘fundamental fact’ at the origin of philosophy is ancient conversion: if on the one hand philosophy was an attempt to reach a ‘metaphysics of conversion’, on the other hand it continued as a ‘spiritual activity having the character of a true conversion’ (HADOT 2002: 232)¹².

9 Many books of the Old Testament were written in the Judaic context, where the influence of Greek culture was already strong. This influence is even more evident, of course, in the case of certain Christian and gnostic gospels, both canonical and non-canonical.

10 An investigation of this sort goes beyond the scope of this essay. I shall thus postpone detailed study of this theme, merely noting here that the comparative method used by Benveniste for approaching the primeval meaning of different words can be useful when dealing with historical cultural phenomena, as is the case with the notion of conversion. I can also suggest here the possibility of a physiological approach to ‘conversion’ as a specific phenomenon related to the human being, in accordance with Hadot’s proposal, following James (cf. HADOT 2002, 230; JAMES 2009).

11 As is the case in Augustin’s theology of conversion.

12 In this sense, «[a] philosophical way of life is therefore in fundamental ways quite a different thing from any religious way of life».

Indeed, Hadot emphasises the persistence of conversion, born in ancient philosophy, in modern philosophy: Descartes's *cogito*, Spinoza's *amor intellectualis*, Bergson's intuition of the duration, the phenomenological approaches of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty – all are figures of this 'return to the origin' at the heart of philosophy. In all its aspects, philosophical conversion is the «entry to an interior freedom, to a new perception of the world, to the authentic existence» (HADOT 2002: 234). It is in this definition that we encounter the core of philosophy as a way of life, on Hadot's conception:

As a matter of fact, when we reflect on what the philosophical life implies, we realize that there is an abyss between philosophical theory and philosophizing as living action. To take a similar case: it may seem as though artists, in their creative activity, do nothing but apply rules, yet there is an immeasurable distance between artistic creation and the abstract theory of art. In philosophy, however, we are not dealing with the mere creation of a work of art: the goal is rather to transform *ourselves*. The act of living in a genuinely philosophical way thus corresponds to an order of reality totally different from that of philosophical discourse. (HADOT 1995: 268)

Philosophical conversion therefore consists in a connection between thought and life. To philosophize is in this sense to acquire a *prosoché*, an orientation:

In both Epicureanism and Stoicism, philosophizing is an 'orientation of the attention' in the present. Only the present must be taken into account: it is with the aim of realizing this orientation that both schools recommend exercises like meditation, the examination of one's conscience, and certain attitudes toward time. The main difference between ancient and modern philosophy consists in the fact that «it was not only Chrysippus or Epicurus who, just because they had developed a philosophical discourse, were considered philosophers. Rather, every person who lived according to the precepts of Chrysippus or Epicurus was every bit as much of a philosopher and even a sage». (HADOT 1995: 272)

Hadot therefore identifies in the medieval scholastic tradition the roots of a different mode of existence that was taken up by modern philosophy: reduced to philosophical discourse, modern, academic philosophy has as its aim not the creation of ways of life but rather the creation of specialists who are able to speak to other specialists. The core of this practice does not involve provoking conversion. Nevertheless, Hadot observes, a genuinely critical philosophical activity developed outside of the universities (and indeed in opposition to the 'philosophy of the universities'), spearheaded by thinkers

such as Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz¹³. Born in a battle against theology, this new form of philosophy was ultimately assimilated into the universities, as occurred with Wolff, Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, such that, with the pivotal exception of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the university became without a doubt the cultural medium of modern philosophy. At the same time, Hadot clarifies that modern philosophy rediscovered «by different paths, some of the existential aspects of ancient philosophy» (HADOT 1995: 271). More precisely, «it must be added that these aspects have never completely disappeared». This is the case with Descartes's *Meditations* and Spinoza's *Ethics*, the aim of which, following the Stoics, was to teach «man how to transform, radically and concretely, his own being, and how to accede to beatitude» (HADOT 1995: 271). Along the same lines stand Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, whose philosophies are «also invitations to radically transform our way of life. Both men were, moreover, thinkers, steeped in the tradition of ancient philosophy» (HADOT 1995: 272). Deeply-rooted in the ancient approach to philosophizing, the aim of which was to transform the form of one's life, these philosophers attempted to convert their readers to a sincere philosophical life: an approach that was not detached from reality or from society. Quite the opposite, as Hadot notes, conversion to a philosophical life «entails a communitary engagement» (HADOT 1995: 274). Finally, therefore, modern philosophy as a way of life, influenced by ancient philosophy, is above all «an invitation to each human being to transform himself. Philosophy is a conversion, a transformation of one's way of being and living, and a quest for wisdom. This is not an easy matter» (HADOT 1995: 275). As Hadot adds, quoting from the final part of Spinoza's *Ethics*, «all excellent things are as difficult as they are rare» (HADOT 1995: 275).

In conclusion, if we accept Hadot's approach, we can argue that philosophy conceived as a way of life can even exist without practices, often historically determined, such as spiritual exercises, confession, and meditation, but it cannot exist without conversion, the 'effort' to transform life. At the same time, religion conceived as a way of life cannot do without conversion. Conversion therefore seems to be connected to all

13 Cf. HADOT 1995: 298.

practices related to transforming the reality and the being of the individual, among which we find philosophy¹⁴.

3. Hadot's impact on Michel Foucault's account of ancient practices of life is well known. Less well known are the effects of Foucault's studies on Pierre Hadot, with whom he at times agreed and at others parted ways. In his short text *Un dialogue interrompu avec Michel Foucault*¹⁵, Hadot argues that it «is a sign of the times, to my mind unexpected and disconcerting» that at the end of the twentieth century Foucault and other authors shared the same «living rediscovery of the ancient experience» (HADOT 2002: 311). Here, Hadot reveals the main argument he shared with Foucault: the notion of philosophy as «style of existence», an «exercise of the self»:

On this work of oneself on oneself, in that exercise of the self, I recognize an essential aspect of the philosophical life: philosophy is an art of living, a lifestyle that encompasses the whole of my existence. (HADOT 2002: 308)

Despite this general agreement, Hadot takes issue with certain aspects of Foucault's approach. He clarifies his difficulties with the notion of an «aesthetics of existence»: for him, the ancient approach to philosophy as a way of life did not involve an aesthetics, a 'culture of the self', connected to the notion of beauty as much as the notion of transformation, transfiguration, a surpassing [*dépassement*] of the self. In the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life, what is at stake is not the construction of oneself as a work of art but rather «an exercise» through which the individual is situated in a totality and exposes himself «as a part of this totality» (HADOT 2002: 310). The second point with which Hadot disagrees concerns Foucault's account of the historical moment in which philosophy ceased to be lived as a form of working of oneself on oneself. As explained above, Hadot argues that this moment must be situated in the Middle Ages, with philosophy's submission to academic, scholastic theology: a modern approach to philosophy as a way of life was born precisely in opposition to the scholastic, academic approach. By contrast, Foucault believes that this break occurred with Descartes's

14 In this sense, Hadot would not completely agree with Cooper's affirmation that «[a] philosophical way of life is therefore in fundamental ways quite a different thing from any religious way of life» (COOPER 2002: 17). Both, even if in different ways, invoke the phenomenon of conversion.

15 HADOT 2002: 305-311.

substitution of evidence as a method for accessing truth, in opposition to asceticism. Nevertheless, also in this text, Hadot remarks that Descartes's central text was titled *Meditations* – «and the word is very important», he argues. The evidence that Descartes sought could only be acquired, on his approach, through spiritual exercise. In this way, Descartes put himself on the path of «the ancient tradition of philosophy conceived as exercise of wisdom» (HADOT 2002: 311).

Hadot's more important observation in this text concerns works with which Foucault was familiar: Hadot's essay on «spiritual exercises»¹⁶ and his report to the *Congrès de philosophie de Bruxelles* in 1953, '*Epistrophe et metanoia dans l'histoire de la philosophie*'¹⁷. These two texts are the crossroads, as it were, where Hadot and Foucault encountered each other, and they reveal the core of each's interest in ancient philosophy. Hadot's observations from his 1953 report are relevant in this regard:

Thus the polarity established between *metanoia* and *epistrophe* engages western thought on a new path, albeit in continuity with the past. So one can affirm that in the history of western philosophy, philosophy itself is always presented as an act of conversion tied to the very structure of reality. An "act of conversion": that is, an act of reversal in relation to an initial movement of exteriorization, which is to say, an act of return to the origin, which is to say, finally – and it is here that the appearance of *metanoia* plays a decisive role – an act in which the human being relives or lives its own genesis. (HADOT 1953)¹⁸

Crucially, Hadot situates the phenomenon of conversion at the centre of many authors of the Western tradition, both ancient and modern. Many of these philosophical «figures» belong to this field: Plato's cave, Stoics meditation, Platonic ecstasy, Cartesian doubt, Hegel's «conversion of consciousness», Bergson's «tension of consciousness», known as the *durée*. To this we can add other «figures» of modern philosophical conversion that Hadot uses as examples in his text on the figure of Socrates. In his third untimely meditation «Schopenhauer as educator», for instance, Nietzsche uses Schopenhauer «just as Plato had used Socrates as a 'semiotics'» (HADOT 1995: 151); indeed this is also how he uses the figure of Zarathustra, or himself «as educator», in *Ecce Homo*. In this way, Hadot shows that the entire modern tradition is inhabited by «figures», all of whom aim

16 Cf. HADOT 1995: 81-125.

17 Cf. HADOT 1953.

18 In a footnote, Hadot clarifies that his reference in this case is Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (cf. BERGSON 1998: 191).

to produce philosophical conversion, to transform ways of life. Following the primeval semiotics created by Plato with the figure of Socrates, other authors reproduced this semiotics by recreating the figure of Socrates, or by creating other own figures. Hadot's commentaries therefore suggest that it is possible to trace the presence of philosophy as a way of life in the modern era through the semiotics of these figures. As he says in the conclusion to his essay *Spiritual Exercises and Christian philosophy* just as the legacy of ancient spiritual exercises was transmitted to Christian spirituality and then to modern philosophy through the influence of Alexandrian culture¹⁹, the phenomenon of conversion, the core of philosophy as a way of life, can be traced to modernity through the semiotics of these figures. Indeed, it is impossible to trace a history of philosophy as a way of life, or to approach philosophy as a way of life, without considering conversion as a pivotal phenomenon; at the same time, it is impossible to approach this phenomenon without considering the semiotic figures of its history. These figures can be approached, in this sense, as «external forces» that produce the effects of conversion. In this sense, religious and philosophical ways of life share a common feature: just as the religious tradition is based on central figures such as the, and as the «Lives of the Saints», the philosophical tradition preserves and creates its own central figures, (such as the ancient «Lives of the Philosophers») if for different purposes.

What are these purposes? And what are the ultimate effects of conversion to a philosophical life? As Hadot remarks, what is at stake is opening the human being to another form of life. Through the presence of these «figures of conversion» in modern philosophy, we can argue, pace Cooper, that even if not through the form of «spiritual exercise», the core element of the tradition of philosophy as a way of life, conversion, persists in modernity.

Despite their differences, and as explained above, Hadot and Foucault agree with the ancient approach to philosophy as a way of life and with the persistence of this approach in modernity. Furthermore, they agree that philosophy as a way of life is characterized by a transformation of ways of being and living. Those who approach philosophy as a way of life necessarily change their lives: another life begins, and this other life is propelled by a starting point: conversion, as stressed by Hadot, or opening oneself up to another practice of oneself, in Foucault – a phenomenon that existed not only in ancient times but in modern philosophy, according to Foucault.

19 Cf. HADOT 1995: 140.

4. Foucault's approach to antiquity is similar Hadot's on this point: both follow the history of practices. Nevertheless, whereas Foucault's works from the 1980s are characterized by a turn to the study of ancient practices (a shift from his previous study of modern practices of the self), Hadot's philological attention was originally oriented toward ancient practices, and only secondarily to modern practices. They meet, in other words, in the middle of their respective paths, but from different perspectives. After tracing his long genealogical path through the history of biopolitics, and through his analyses of the hermeneutics of the Western subject, Foucault examines the ways in which the effects of truth, the effects of constraint, and the effects of freedom are produced throughout history: how free subjects are created, the practices through which this is accomplished, and how subjects create themselves as free. From this point of view, he approaches the notion of "care of the self" as a representative of the practices of antiquity – meditation, confession, technologies of the self – where what is at stake are the effects of truth by which the self creates and transforms itself²⁰. This path leads him to focus his attention on the practice of «parrhesia», the importance of which is well represented by the fact that he dedicates his two last courses at the *Collège de France* to the theme. *Parrhesia*, as a practice of «telling the whole truth» and of transforming political and ethical conditions through having the courage to tell the truth, finds one of its first exemplifying figures in Socrates, who commits to telling the truth before the Athenian court, even though this spells his certain death. From the field of politics to the field of ethics, *parrhesia* preserves these characteristics, according to Foucault. In both spheres, the political and the ethical, *parrhesia* has the aim of transforming the previous conditions of existence: if the city or the individual accepts the truth, the whole, hurtful truth, and the necessary pact, it is transformed, opened to another kind of life. In this sense, *parrhesia* is similar to virtue. The effect of *parrhesia* is in this sense an effect of transformation of the soul. It belongs to the field of the «care of the self» in precisely this regard: the *parrhesiast* is a figure of caring, through the truth about himself and his world.

20 It is important to note that the «care of the self» can be approached as the last step of the history of Western «care» [souci], which Foucault also encountered in his studies on «pastoral power» as a power over individuals developed by the modern State.

Parrhesia is in this sense a specific technique for approaching and modifying forms of life, a *technè peri ton bion*²¹.

Therefore, it is through the history of the practice of *parresia* – as a practice of personal transformation, as a *technè peri ton bion* that aims to prompt a break in the political and ethical conditions of existence – that Foucault approaches philosophy as a way of life. In this sense, *parrhesia* corresponds to Hadot's notion of philosophy: it implies an effort to change one's way of life, and it is represented as an external force that provokes this transformation. Accepting this force, this truthful testimony, implies returning to an authentic condition of being, a «change of orientation» and a «change of thought», an *epistrophè* and a *metanoia*: in a word, conversion. At the same time, for Foucault, the *parrhesiast* has nothing to do with wisdom or prophecy: the *parrhesiast* doesn't reveal anything, and he does not speak in enigmas²². This is a critical tension aimed to effect transformation. It is particularly evident in the particular form of *parrhesia* that Foucault calls *alethurgy*, the manifestation of truth in a life, in a form of life, the *bios*: «Etymologically, alethurgy would be the production of truth, the act by which truth is manifested»²³. In this sense, alethurgy corresponds to a philosophical way of life. Its most representative form is the Cynic:

Cynicism is not satisfied with coupling, or establishing a correspondence, a harmony or homophony between a certain type of discourse and a life conforming to the principles stated in that discourse. Cynicism links mode of life and truth in a much tighter, more precise way. It makes the form of existence an essential condition of truth-telling. It makes the form of existence the reductive practice which will make space for truth-telling. Finally, it makes the form of existence a way of making truth itself visible in one's acts, one's body, the way one dresses, and in the way one conducts oneself and lives. In short, Cynicism makes life, existence, bios, what could be called an alethurgy, a manifestation of truth. (FOUCAULT 2011: 172)

Foucault stresses that Cynicism is not only an ancient way of life but «an historical category which, in various forms and with diverse objectives, runs through the whole of Western history» (FOUCAULT 2011: 174). For this reason, he evokes «something of this

21 On this point, cf. SELLARS 2003.

22 Cf. FOUCAULT 2011: 17, 25.

23 FOUCAULT 2011: 3. In Foucault's words: «by creating the fictional word *alethourgia* from *alethourges*, we could call 'alethurgy' (manifestation of truth) the set of possible procedures, verbal or otherwise, by which one brings to light what is posited as true, as opposed to the false, the hidden, the unspeakable, the unforeseeable, or the forgotten» (lecture of 23 January 1980). Cf. FOUCAULT 2011: 20.

trans-historical Cynicism», corresponding to the forms of alethurgy that can be found after antiquity: in other words, the persistence of philosophy as a way of life in modernity. He reflects in this sense on the persistence of Cynicism through early-Christian ascetic and monastic forms of living²⁴, in political, anti-institutional, and clearly revolutionary forms of being²⁵, and in the artistic way of life²⁶. The following defence in relation to the second of these three categories is of particular importance:

it must manifest directly, by its visible form, its constant practice, and its immediate existence, the concrete possibility and the evident value of an other life, which is the true life. Here again, right at the center of the experience, of the life of revolutionary militancy, you find the theme, so fundamental and at the same time so enigmatic and interesting, of the true life, of that problem of the true life which was already raised by Socrates and which I do not think has ceased to run through all Western [thought]. (FOUCAULT 2011: 184)

The trans-historical character of Cynicism, also present in modernity, appears in the coincidence between another life and a true life. Thus the alethurgic way of life entails conversion to another life. In this way, but from a different perspective, we again find our main path: Cynical practice entails «a change in the conduct of individuals, and a change also in the general configuration of the world» (FOUCAULT 2011: 313). In this sense, Foucault argues, the Cynics take up one of «the most traditional themes of classical philosophy», revealing that «the true life can only be an other life, in relation to the traditional life of men, including philosophers». The life of the ordinary person is not the true life, and it is revealed precisely through the bios of the Cynic:

I live in an other way, and by the very otherness of my life, I show you that what you are looking for is somewhere other than where you are looking for it, that the path you are taking is other than the one you

24 «In Christian asceticism we find what I think was, for a long time, for centuries, the major medium of the Cynic mode of being across Europe» (FOUCAULT 2011: 181).

25 «[T]he idea of a mode of life as the irruptive, violent, scandalous manifestation of the truth is and was part of revolutionary practice and of the forms taken by revolutionary movements throughout the nineteenth century. Revolution in the modern European world—this is a fact which is known and I think we talked about it last year—was not just a political project; it was also a form of life» (FOUCAULT 2011: 183).

26 «I think it is especially in modern art that the question of Cynicism becomes particularly important. That modern art was, and still is for us the vehicle of the Cynic mode of being, of the principle of connecting style of life and manifestation of the truth» (FOUCAULT 2011: 187).

should be taking. And the function of the true life [...] is showing, while being wholly other, that it is others who are in otherness, mistaken, that they are where they should not be. (FOUCAULT 2011: 314)

Even in its subsequent forms, the alethurgic form of life preserves its previous, ancient content: its aim is to show that the true life consists in living differently, in provoking the transformation of one's way of life. The final aim of the alethurgic way of life is «to show that the world will be able to get back to its truth, will be able to transfigure itself and become other in order to get back to what it is in its truth» (FOUCAULT 2011: 315). This leads the way to a perfect definition of *epistrophè*. On the other hand, this «return» is possible «only at the price of a change, a complete alteration, the complete change and alteration in the relation one has to self» (FOUCAULT 2011: 315): this is the definition of *metanoia*. Thus Foucault seems to connect the example of the alethurgic life to the examples of philosophy as a way of life provided by Hadot. Like his colleague, he reveals this by getting us to see that this approach to philosophy is trans-historical, and above all how it influences ways of life that are apparently not philosophical but that share a common core with this form of philosophy: the call to another life. Thus the two authors find in the study of “conversion” a common path of reading philosophy as a *techne periton bion*, a mode of existence and a way of life. This point of view also supports the thesis of the persistence of the philosophical way of life in modernity.

Finally, it is important to stress the basic transformation, caused by Christianity, of alethurgic practice, a transformation concerning precisely the transformation of the individual's life, in relation to the world. Christian asceticism entails a relation addressed not to a world that is other (*monde autre*) but to another world (*autre monde*). At the same time, this conversion is not only provoked by the alethurgic expression of an other life: this otherness, exemplified through an other life, has as its aim the other life (*l'autre vie*) and access to an other world (*autre monde*). It is not the transformation of the world that is at stake in Christian conversion but rather the transformation of the individual's life: «it seems to me that this structure is the combination, the meeting point, the junction between an originally Cynic asceticism and an originally Platonic metaphysics» (FOUCAULT 2011: 319).

This shift in the form of conversion, provoked by Christianity and stressed by Foucault, can also be seen as a turning point in the history of philosophy as a way of life from an alethurgic point of view. When the figure of otherness, the fundamental core of conversion, moves into a metaphysical field, the ancient philosophical way of life

intersects with the religious way of life and seems to disappear from Western thought. Only through a radical change to the relation between the two polar opposites of conversion, life and its otherness will it be possible to speak of following the path of the alethurgic way of life.

5. Indeed, an important figure appeared in the age of humanism, reversing this path. In 1516, Thomas More published his *Utopia*, the first work to take this name. It initiated a long and successful philosophical, political and literary genre. The book concerns the tale of a sailor on a far-off island, as well as the forms of life – all philosophically oriented – of its inhabitants. A first consideration concerns the structure of the book: the text consists of a first part, involving narration and dialogue (often neglected by critics) between More and the imaginary sailor Raphael Hythloday, and a second part, which describes the forms of life of Utopia's inhabitants. As More writes:

This Raphael who from his family carries the name of Hythloday, is not ignorant of the Latin tongue, but is eminently learned in the Greek, having applied himself more particularly to that than to the former, because he had given himself much to philosophy, in which he knew that the Romans have left us nothing that is valuable, except what is to be found in Seneca and Cicero. (MORE 2012: 30)

The main character of Utopia is therefore a follower of the Stoic tradition. At the same time, he represents the unusual ways of life of the inhabitants of the island, generally thought to be located in South America – an island that is both Nowhere (from the greek *ou-topos*) and a Good place (*eu-topos*): an imaginary place with imaginary ways of life, relating to the real world as a sort of inverted image, but also as a call to change things. When Raphael stops his narration, More writes:

[I] told him I would find out some other time for examining this subject more particularly, and for discoursing more copiously upon it. And, indeed, I shall be glad to embrace an opportunity of doing it. In the meanwhile, though it must be confessed that he is both a very learned man and a person who has obtained a great knowledge of the world, I cannot perfectly agree to everything he has related. However, there are many things in the commonwealth of Utopia that I rather wish, than hope, to see followed in our governments. (MORE 2012: 190)

Here we encounter two effects of Raphael's tale: the first concerning More and the second concerning a possible transformation of the world. The image of Utopia produces certain

effects of truth, transforms the way we look at the world, pushes us to meditate on uncommon ways of life. It provides us with a semiotic figure alongside those figures mentioned by Hadot, each of them agents of conversion. It is clear, for instance, that the source of Plato's Atlantides, a *mythos*, can be placed alongside these figures; equally clear is the effect of reconfiguring one's relation with an other life, with an other world, in contrast to the historical turning point at the end of antiquity stressed by Foucault. Utopia does not appear as a world to be reached, whose rules are to be applied to the real world and whose forms of life are to be imposed on 1516 England. Utopia seems to return the metaphysical, religious, other world to earth, even if via the imagination. The world then becomes a «world which is other», even if it does not exist and no one can believe in it; indeed, its (non)existence has real effects on the individual and on the community of readers. As the French philosopher Miguel Abensour recently wrote, it is «[a]s if utopia said to the reader: it's very serious, but it's not that serious» (ABENSOUR 2013: 162). In his studies on the philosophical content of utopia, Abensour identifies the core of utopian thought as an «awakening», describing More as a «technician of awakening» (ABENSOUR 2013, 58). The «utopian impetus» consists precisely in the effect of generating a swerve. Utopia is above all a creation of modernity, but its philosophical effect has much to do with antiquity, precisely with the ancient form of philosophizing rediscovered in the age of More, Erasmus, and Montaigne²⁷: a recovery not only of content, as an academic *vulgata* might show, but rather a whole tradition of practices and effects. Among them, and precisely against the scholastic form of philosophy on the one hand and the forms of religious conversion still present in the religious context on the other, just a few years before the elaboration of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* (1522) we find the recovery of a secular form of conversion:

philosophy and utopia owe their existence to a conversion, to a *metanoia* which in each case requires resolution, obstinacy even in the practice of doubt and of the swerve, or in that of astonishment, and that cannot be satisfied, like the tyrant of Syracuse, with simulation or pretence. (ABENSOUR 2013: 57)²⁸

²⁷ The latter is considered by Nietzsche to be superior to Schopenhauer as the figure of an educator.

²⁸ In this sense, through a secular way Abensour develops Prévost's religious approach to More (cf. PRÉVOST 1978: 158).

Humanistic *Utopia* recovers the ancient forms of conversion through figures, bringing to modernity a form of philosophy as a way of life that is based precisely on that characteristic phenomenon – *metanoia* – that characterizes Hadot’s notion, as well as Foucault’s notion of alethurgy: a human, all too human conversion the effect of which is to cause the modern subject to face himself and his world, as though he were looking in the mirror²⁹ – a recovery that the variegated forms of modern utopian thought bring to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, up to Bloch’s considerations on the meaning of the «spirit of utopia» and Lévinas’s existentialism. As a technique of modern forms of life, utopia must emerge from the all too narrow field of politics. Its effects become more extensive and complex once it is related to the phenomena that preoccupied the stoic educators of Hythlodai and is again oriented to the transformation of the self and the world. As a figure of *metanoia*, utopia thus appears as the first of many such figures in modernity. Their real meaning is revealed in the opening pages of Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia*: «*incipit vita nova*» (BLOCH 2000: 3).

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29 As Foucault remarks in his text on the *Other Spaces* (cf. FOUCAULT 2001: 1571-1581).

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