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## The Joy of Difference: Foucault and Hadot on the Aesthetic and the Universal in Philosophy

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# **The Joy of Difference: Foucault and Hadot on the Aesthetic and the Universal in Philosophy**

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*Abstract:* The intersection of Foucault and Hadot's work in the philosophy of antiquity is a dense and fruitful meeting. Not only do each of the philosophers offer competing interpretations of antiquity, their differences also reflect on their opposing assessments of the contemporary situation and the continuing philosophical debate between the universal and the relative. Unpacking these two philosophers' disagreements on antiquity sheds light on how Hadot's commitment to the Universal and Foucault's commitment to an aesthetics of existence stem from their diagnoses of the present and the persistent philosophical issue of universalism. This line of analysis is especially productive to pursue in relation to Hadot and Foucault because of the rigor of their thought, the lack of polemics in its debate, and the importance of both thinkers to philosophy generally.

*Key words:* Aesthetics, Foucault, Hadot, Mysticism, Domination, Universal

*Running head:* The Joy of Difference

## **The Joy of Difference: Foucault and Hadot on the Aesthetic and the Universal in Philosophy**

In 1970, Michael Foucault was elected to a chair in the ‘History of Systems of Thought’ at the *Collège de France*, one of the most prestigious academic institutions in France. His responsibilities as a member primarily consisted of research and a limited amount of lecturing. However, his position also included other duties, notably the election of new thinkers to replace those who had retired or were otherwise unable to continue. It was as part of these duties that Foucault encouraged Pierre Hadot, who occupied a chair in Latin Patristics at the *École pratique des Hautes Études*, to accept candidacy for election to a chair in the ‘History of Hellenistic and Roman Thought’ at the *Collège de France* in 1983.

Foucault and Hadot met for the first time in person during the discussions of Hadot’s candidacy for a chair although they were already both quite familiar with each other’s work (Flynn 2005, 614). Foucault in particular had been an admirer of Hadot’s work on Hellenistic and Roman philosophy for some time and had used it in his own work on antiquity:

I believe it was in 1982 that Michel Foucault first mentioned Pierre Hadot to me. Struck by Foucault’s enthusiasm, I photocopied a number of Hadot’s articles, but, to my regret, never got around to reading them until several years after Foucault’s death. I immediately understood, and shared, Foucault’s excitement (Davidson 1995, 1).

Foucault was struck by Hadot’s characterization of ancient philosophy as a way of life—a spiritual practice of self-transformation that was more than just an assemblage of truths, it was a practice of continual improvement of oneself and one’s world (Foucault 1990a, 8). The two philosophers both shared the goal with the ancients that philosophy might occasion personal and social transformation. In this regard, Foucault’s description of his role as an intellectual, “This work of modifying one’s own thought and that of others seems to me to be the intellectual’s reason for being,” parallels Hadot’s own description of philosophy as “a conversion, a

transformation of one's way of being and living," even as they both echo the ancients' practice of philosophy (Foucault 1996b, 461; Hadot 1995a, 275).

Interestingly, their conception of philosophy as a transformative practice acts reflexively back on the ancients from whom they got such a notion of philosophy. These two thinkers approach ancient philosophy as part of a practice of philosophy as a way of life and, resultantly, Hadot and Foucault put ancient philosophy to use as part of their projects of contemporary transformation. In the history of philosophy both thinkers find a body of wisdom that can be cultivated and reworked to serve in the present. Foucault explicitly approaches his studies in the history of philosophy "beginning with a current question" in order to encourage "people to live and to look at the world in a new way" while Hadot aims "to nourish the spiritual life of men and women of our times, as well as my own" (Foucault 1996a, 406; Hadot 1995b, 280). For both of these thinkers, the history of philosophy serves as matrix through which they can work to transform themselves and others as part of a philosophical life.

For all their cross-pollination and agreement on the richness and depth of the idea of philosophy as a way of life, the two disagree on what exactly this way of life is and how ancient philosophy could contribute. At a conference held in recognition of the fourth anniversary of Foucault's death, Hadot delivered some remarks on Foucault's work in the philosophy of antiquity. These remarks are especially worth close consideration for two reasons. First, both thinkers are notoriously reticent to discuss what their goals are for the transformation of their own lives and the lives of those around them. Hadot's remarks offer a privileged window into the two philosophers' different present-day concerns, a discussion that is ongoing in the scholarship on Foucault but has hardly begun in regards to Hadot. Moreover, even in regards to Foucault, who has had many articles written that aim to uncover the implicit directionalities of

his work, Hadot's important piece has not been examined in this context. *Reflections on the Idea of the "Cultivation of the Self"* is a valuable reference for both Foucault and Hadot but, as Hadot's article is quite brief, I will have to elaborate upon its claims by drawing widely on other sources in order to make them fully intelligible to readers who are not familiar with both Foucault's and Hadot's corpus. More specifically, this paper will draw on the disparate comments each philosopher makes across the breadth of their work in order to reveal their contemporary positions and how they are reflected in their differing interpretations of antiquity.

This essay concludes that what is at stake in Hadot and Foucault's disputes is the place of the aesthetic and the Universal in philosophy. Foucault resolutely crafts a philosophy that highlights the necessary and strategic value of the aesthetic while Hadot aims his philosophy at the mystical task of evoking the Universal. It is important to state at the outset that the issues raised around the aesthetic and the Universal that are at stake between these two members of the *Collège de France* have an importance beyond them for the meaning and place of philosophy today. These two philosophers provide contemporary positions and openings into debates that have roiled philosophy since the pre-Socratics: Hadot seeks unity and conformity to the Universal while Foucault seeks to fracture universalizing powers in order to seek freedom from their tyranny.

### **Hadot's Position and Criticism of Foucault**

Hadot begins his *Reflections on the Idea of the "Cultivation of the Self"* by noting that he will be emphasizing his differences from Foucault instead of their many similarities: "Here, I should like to offer a few remarks with a view to delineating the differences of interpretation, and in the last analysis of philosophical choice, which separate us, above and beyond our points

of agreement” (1995c, 206). This is a critical sentence in Hadot’s text, for it not only contains the subject of his paper, it also delineates what he believes the ultimate source and nature of their differences is—a “philosophical choice.” Hadot’s reference to his and Foucault’s differences as “philosophical choice” signals that, in the last analysis, Hadot does not believe that Foucault’s position is impossible or untenable although it does result from a “choice” that he would not make. This sets the tenor of the paper as one of disagreement but not of polemics; Hadot does not believe Foucault is irrational as much as misguided.<sup>1</sup> In order to more fully probe this friendly difference and its relation to philosophical choice, we will have to turn to the rest of Hadot’s essay.

To clarify Hadot’s own contemporary position in reference to his claims about Foucault, it will be necessary to give an extended quote in which he summarizes several key elements of his position:

Everyone is free to define philosophy as he likes, to choose whatever philosophy he wishes, or to invent—if he can—whatever philosophy he may think valid. Descartes and Spinoza still remained faithful to the ancient definition: for them, philosophy was “the practice of wisdom.” If, following their example, we believe that it is essential for mankind to try to accede to the state of wisdom, we shall find in the ancient traditions of the various philosophical schools—Socratism, Platonism, Aristotelianism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, Cynicism, Skepticism—models of life, fundamental forms in accordance with which reason may be applied to human existence, and archetypes of the quest for wisdom. It is precisely this plurality of ancient schools that is precious. It allows us to compare the consequences of all the various possible fundamental attitudes of reason, and offers a privileged field for experimentation. This, of course, presupposes that we reduce these philosophies to their spirit and essence, detaching them from the fundamental propositions that they themselves considered essential. This is not, by the way, a matter of choosing one or the other of these traditions to the exclusion of others. Epicureanism and Stoicism, for example, correspond to two opposite but inseparable poles of our inner life: the demands of our moral conscience, and the flourishing of our joy in existing (1995a, 272-273).

The opening of the quote refers to Hadot’s preferred understanding of philosophy as the practice of wisdom. The practice of wisdom, the quote informs us, involves different applications or attitudes of reason applied to a life. More specifically, if we are to be wise and practice

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<sup>1</sup> Hadot capitalizes Universal and several words that he uses synonymously such as All, Reason, and, less often, God or the Divine. I will follow his capitalization when explicitly speaking from his perspective or relating his arguments. Otherwise, I will use the lower-case as is more conventional.

philosophy, reason needs to be applied to the two opposite but inseparable poles of our “inner life”: the demands of conscience and our “joy in existing.”

Towards the end of the same essay, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Hadot adds substance to these notions by defining these two poles of conscience and joy more thoroughly:

The trick is to maintain oneself on the level of reason, and not allow oneself to be blinded by political passions, anger, resentments, or prejudices. To be sure, there is an equilibrium—almost impossible to achieve—between the inner peace brought about by wisdom, and the passions which the sight of injustices, sufferings, and misery of mankind cannot help but give rise. Wisdom, however, consists precisely in such an equilibrium, and inner peace is indispensable for efficacious action (Hadot 1995a, 274).<sup>2</sup>

Hadot argues that the first pole of our inner life, conscience, calls us to rectify injustices and involve ourselves in the improvement of our world. Conscience is a critical and sympathetic pole that draws our attention to deficiencies in the current situation and motivates us to action in order to improve life. The second pole, the joy of existing, calls us to celebrate the beauty of life in its present condition. Joy is not a critical attitude but a celebratory one that takes up the events of the world as beautiful even in their unsavory moments; joy is an embrace of what is, a love of whatever the All brings because life is good regardless of its immediate form or consequences.

These two poles, Hadot informs us, are necessary and quite difficult to bring to an equilibrium. For instance, our joy in existing can work at cross-purposes to the demands of conscience. After all, why would one want to act to change things if one is joyous with the way things are? Moreover, just as celebration of the way things are can work against the action of conscience, so can conscience work against joy: the passionate inspiration that gives rise to moral action can easily disturb one and come at the expense of repose in life and the celebration of the Universal. A critical attitude and the passionate need to change things often express a

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<sup>2</sup> Hadot is meticulous in defining all his terms, which he attributes to an early frustration he developed from reading Thomist philosophies: “It gave me a lasting distaste for philosophies which don’t clearly define the vocabulary they use” (Hadot 1995b, 277).

discontent with the way things are that can undercut their celebration and one's joy, just as joy can serve to erase the pangs of conscience that demand change.

However difficult the poles are to balance, Hadot argues that both poles are necessary for effective moral action. The joy in existing and the demands of conscience are linked because without a love of life one would be unmotivated to improve it. Moreover, without the demands of conscience that motivates individuals to change life, an individual would not properly be alive but a disconnected and remote observer of life, reveling in the view of life but not participating.

Is there a way to combine the passionate desire to transform things with an attitude of joyous celebration and revelry in the present beauty of the cosmos? For Hadot, practicing philosophy means striking the proper balance between inner repose and sensitivity to the events of the world that call one to participate. Ancient philosophy is full of different modes of reason that provide different ways of combining these poles. Moreover, ancient philosophy does even more than offer different ways of negotiating joy and conscience; it also reminds us of the costs and benefits of adopting these different avenues of reason. Ancient philosophy offers “a privileged field of experimentation” for us today; we can look to the ancients for inspiration on how to live wisely while also drawing on a concrete history of the consequences of following the many different attitudes of reason.

However, several questions must emerge for us at this point about the status of the inner poles and the different ways of balancing them wisely. It is not clear from the quote why Hadot insists on the existence of these inner poles or why we should experiment with the different philosophies. We will need to answer these questions before moving forward.

First, in regards to the status of the inner poles, Hadot's arguments for them are inseparable from those arguments made by the ancients that he typically studies. Many of his



comments on the poles of moral life come at the end of long texts on ancient philosophy and build on the texts and authors he was interpreting in order to establish and further his own position. In other words, his arguments for the poles draw on the arguments of the ancients that he works on; it is even sometimes impossible to discover the moment in the text in which his voice emerges from that of the philosopher that he studies, as is the case in his work on Marcus Aurelius (1998, 240-241, 310-313). As a result, it would be impossible to fully relate his arguments without covering the lengthy and complex treatment he gives the philosophies of antiquity—a task which is both outside of the primary focus of this paper and impossible given space constraints.

However, Hadot does give an additional and original argument for the poles that it is important to consider here. Hadot concludes from his extensive and close readings of the philosophies of antiquity that they share certain similarities—namely, many of these philosophies have a “universal” and “perennial character” (Hadot 1998, 312). The “universal” and “perennial character” of these insights explains the continued impact of these ancient works, as in the case of the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius:

Nevertheless, we feel a highly particular emotion when we enter, as it were, into spiritual intimacy of a soul's secrets, and are thus directly associated with the efforts of a man who, fascinated by the only thing necessary—the absolute value of moral good—is trying to do what, in the last analysis, we are all trying to do: to live in complete consciousness and lucidity; to give each of our instants its fullest intensity; and to give meaning to our entire life. Marcus is talking to himself, but we get the impression that he is talking to each one of us (1998, 313).

Marcus Aurelius' message rings so true and is so pressing that we find ourselves lost in the moments he describes, deliberating the same points as if we were working alongside him because his points are universal and perennial, they can be recognized by all people in all times.

Hadot's argument on this point is one of a historian arguing from the continued presence of certain moral issues and their grouping around the two poles of inner conscience throughout history. His argument does not draw from metaphysical deductions but instead builds from

historical and empirical consistency: given the movement of time and the great changes that have occurred, Hadot finds that certain ideas draw like responses over the ages, as Marcus Aurelius' ideas have. From his own historical evidence, he is able to conclude that there is a universal and perennial character to the Universal.

The second question: Why does Hadot think we need to experiment with different philosophies? In other words, why isn't it the case that we just need to find the single best philosophy that most accurately expresses the wisdom needed to balance the two poles? The answer to this question surprisingly finds its clearest voice in Hadot's work on Wittgenstein. In concluding his interpretation of Wittgenstein, Hadot takes away this lesson:

Far from forbidding me the notion of the unutterable, language opens me to it: because I had wanted to speak exactly and logically, I am obliged to accept to employ a language that is logically inexact, a language that represents nothing, but that evokes. [...] It is in this necessary effort, but necessarily dedicated to its failure, that philosophy discovers its own impossibility. In other words, it runs up against the insurmountable limits of language or better still, for philosophy, the insurmountable limits are language (2004, 45-46).<sup>3</sup>

Hadot draws on Wittgenstein to argue that our language cannot represent the All because it cannot replicate the total "logical structure" of the All (Hadot 2004, 29). Language is a part of the All and does not exist separately or outside of the All—it has no place from which to step back to gain perspective on the All and fully contain it in its grasp. Language is always embedded in the All and is characterized by its limited and dependant relation to it. The descriptions language allows us may be accurate but they never completely describe or capture the order of the Universal; language is always marked by its incompleteness.

Hadot's Wittgensteinian conclusions help explain why we must experiment with different philosophies. All philosophies are held short of a True accounting of the All because of their reliance on language. Instead of capturing the Universal as it is in its totality, philosophy is held at mysticism, at evoking an experience of the All through offering different and limited

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<sup>3</sup> All translations from *Wittgenstein et les limites du langage* are the translation of the author.

descriptions of it. This is why language that speaks “exactly and logically” employs “a language that is logically inexact”: an exacting language must acknowledge its own limitations and inexactitude or be rendered inexact about its own limitations. Conversely, language can only evoke that exactitude or completeness by gesturing at its own inadequacy to capture it. We might follow the Stoics, Epicureans, Skeptics, or even the Cynics and gain a different piece of the truth of the Universal but no philosophy will capture it finally. Instead, we need to look at the consequences of the different paths of living in harmony with the All, without ever being able to finally dismiss all of the alternate philosophies because they are the result of different but perhaps equally as evocative conceptualizations of the All. Hence the reason for Hadot’s different names for that order—the All, the Universal, the Whole, the Divine, God—each name evokes an aspect of that which is beyond capture. We need to evaluate these different paths of reason both mystically in examining how well they evoke an experience of the All in us by pointing to it and practically in how well they work in our lives to allow us to balance the two poles of our inner life:

Platonism, Aristotelianism, Cynicism, Pyrrhonism also each have a universal character, and one of the historical and philosophical tasks called forth by Hadot’s work is precisely to provide a description of each of these universal existential attitudes, each of the styles of life that they propose (Davidson 1995, 35).

Each of the ancient philosophies have a piece of wisdom to pass down about how human beings can balance their lives in acceding to the Universal by cultivating wisdom on how one should comport oneself as part of it. Different philosophies give rise to this experience and offer different forms of wisdom to balance to the twin poles of human experience that the Universal calls us to honor.

Hadot’s motivation, as we said earlier, is “to nourish the spiritual life of men and women of our times, as well as my own.” We are now able to provide a more detailed notion of what

such nourishment is for Hadot by means of our discussion of the two poles, philosophical wisdom, and the Universal.

Spiritual exercises and practices nourish the individual when human reason seeks to balance the two poles of consciences and joy in conformity with the Universal by taking up a particular path of reason that places the life of the individual in the context of the Universal:

The word “spiritual” is quite apt to make us understand that these exercises are the result, not merely of thought, but of the individual’s entire psychism. Above all, the word “spiritual” reveals the true dimensions of these exercises. By means of them the individual raises himself up to the life of the objective Spirit; that is to say, he re-places himself within the perspective of the Whole (“Become eternal by transcending yourself”) (Hadot 1995d, 82).

The Universal is essential to ethics because it provides the order to the universe that allows our actions to have definite place and meaning (Hadot 1998, 310). Philosophy nourishes our spiritual life by evoking that order and encouraging us to live wisely in it, balancing its celebration and the call to actively work as an agent of it.

Hadot gives philosophical basis and solidity to these notions not through logical deduction but through the force of historical argumentation and mysticism. He calls forth the Universal by force of that which is decidedly local—the particular records of the historical archive and through the evocation of the mystical experience that people have of the Universal. Through the archives of antiquity, Hadot surmises that certain issues have always been present in philosophy but never finally decidable. If language is the limitation of philosophy and language can never entirely capture the Universal in its entirety, no philosophy has an exclusive monopoly on its account of the Universal. Moreover, if reason is that faculty that perceives the order that is the structure of the All then reason can only ever give us fragments of its order and truth. From Hadot’s perspective, the history of philosophy is the record of human kind’s never-ending attempt to fully capture that Truth which is beyond capture and to live in harmony with the Universal. Instead of finally reaching the True ethics, we must choose between different true

ethics. In our search for the Universal, we find ethics that attain a limited translation of it and it is up to us to choose the one that best evokes in us that which is greater than us and has acceptable practical consequences in inspiring joy and action. For Hadot, philosophy and is a path of wisdom that seeks to live in conformity with that which is always beyond us. At the basis of his argument for Universality from historical records is the final equivocation that the evidence will never add up to certainty and his choice to follow the path of mysticism to the Universal is a matter of taste. Rather than choose to attribute the multiplicity of different forms of reason to the fundamental lack of a singular order in human life, he finds it more to his taste to argue from the evidence that it stems from our inability to capture the Universal. That finally irresolvable preference to argue from the evidence for a Universal instead for the aesthetic draws him back to the aesthetic right at the moment he would finally seek to break free from it. This also explains why he began by describing his difference from Foucault and as one of choice—ultimately, for Hadot, their differences are one of choice based in taste and preference and not in the truth or falsity of logical deduction.

### **Foucault's Defense and His Position**

Why does Hadot reject Foucault's turn to aesthetics, if his own choice to pursue the Universal is based on taste and preference and not the Truth? In his essay on Foucault, he details his reasoning:

What I am afraid of is that, by focusing his interpretation too exclusively on the culture of the self, the care of the self, and conversion toward the self—more generally, by defining his ethical model as an aesthetics of existence—M. Foucault is propounding a culture of the self which is *too* aesthetic. In other words, this may be a new form of Dandyism, late-twentieth century style (1995c, 211).

Hadot understands Foucault not just to be studying an aesthetics of existence but also to be “propounding a culture of the self” in the present. He criticizes Foucault for cultivating

resources for a contemporary aestheticism which he views as “*too aesthetic*” because it may result in a “late-twentieth century style” of Dandyism. Hadot seems to believe that Foucault wanted to develop a focus on aesthetics as the Dandy’s aesthetics—as some kind of attractiveness cultivated for pleasure—and this beauty would drive out or subsume the appropriate use of philosophy in evoking the Universal.

Hadot may be correct about Foucault’s intentions to aestheticize contemporary culture; however, his understanding of that aesthetics is not accurate:

And if I have taken an interest in Antiquity, it is because, for a whole series of reasons, the idea of a morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared. To this absence of a morality, one responds, or must respond, with an investigation which is that of an aesthetics of existence (Foucault 1996a, 451).

So, while it is clear Hadot was right that Foucault is interested in a present-day aesthetics of existence, it still remains to be seen what lies behind it, if not Dandyism.

Against Hadot, I believe that one does not need to regard Foucault’s turn to an aesthetics of existence as form of Dandyism. Foucault’s emphasis on an aesthetic approach to moral and political life draws from the critical arc of his earlier work that sought to expose and problematize modern forms of domination, most importantly normalization. In other words, Foucault’s aesthetics of existence is a reasoned and sensible response to the types of domination that he details in the majority of his work; his turn to an aesthetics of existence is not just a Dandy’s turn to stylization for the sake of the pleasure or attractiveness but is a response to domination. To demonstrate this point and more fully flesh out Foucault’s notion of an aesthetics of existence, I will need to briefly discuss normalization and domination as the context in which his analysis and development of the aesthetics of existence arises.

It is important at the outset of this discussion of normalization and domination to define the key terms of this discussion: domination, norms, and normalization. In regards to

domination, Foucault states that one of his primary goals is “playing with as little domination as possible” where domination means “situations or states...in which the power relations, instead of being mobile, allowing the various participants to adopt strategies modifying them, remain blocked, frozen” (Foucault 1996c, 447; 434). By this definition, domination is state of inflexibility where the power relations that define and surround subjects become calcified and resistant to transformation. Domination results in subjects become enmeshed in immobile relations of power that not only define subjects’ worlds but leave them stuck with a fixed set of influences that create and shape the subjects themselves.

In Foucault’s analyses of the 1970s, from *Abnormal* to *The Birth of Biopolitics*, much of the domination or movement towards domination in contemporary society is produced through normalization. However, it is immediately important to distinguish between norms and normalization because their relationship to domination is quite different: norms do not necessarily result in domination while normalization does tend toward it.

A norm is a type of goal that is stated positively as a target. What is essential about norms is that they state their targets in their specificity; in order to meet a norm one must do exactly as the norm instructs. For instance, a norm might exist for children: ‘A good child sits quietly and reads.’ This is different than negative expressions of power that just give instruction *not* to perform a particular action while leaving every other option acceptable. For instance, the instruction ‘Do not hit your brother’ only states that one should not hit one’s brother, leaving the freedom to perform any other action. However, to follow the norm ‘A good child sits quietly and reads,’ the child must sit quietly, read, and perform no other action. It may seem from this first glance that norms do tend towards the ossification of power relations and thus lead to domination but, as controlling as norms are, norms alone do not necessarily result in domination.

Foucault's later work on the Greeks and Romans of antiquity demonstrates that certain usages of norms do not have to result in domination.

The Greeks and Romans of antiquity were a culture possessed of many norms but they had flexibility in the shaping of those norms. So while the Greeks might have felt some compulsion to join a religious cult or philosophical school, they would have had a variety of different cults and schools to choose from and flexibility in modifying those norms:

For [the Greeks], reflection on sexual behavior as a moral domain was not a means of internalizing, justifying, or formalizing general interdictions imposed on everyone; rather, it was a means of developing—for the smallest minority of the population, made up of free, adult males—an aesthetics of existence, the purposeful art of a freedom perceived as a power game...it was problematized in thought as the relationship, for a free man, between the exercise of his freedom, the forms of his power, and his access to truth (Foucault 1990a, 252-253).

The elites of Greco-Roman society practiced the artistic ability to “adopt strategies modifying” norms and the power relations that flowed from them—freeing the elite Greek and Roman males from domination. Put simply, while norms do restrict the realm of possible actions much more greatly than forbidding or negative exercises of power, they do not necessarily result in domination if there is a variety of norms or if the norms are able to be modified.

However, certain normalizing applications of norms will almost certainly result in domination—Foucault's work from the 1970s equally well shows this. The goal of normalization is precisely to prevent the types of choices and variable interpretations of norms that Foucault found among the Greeks. Normalization establishes procedures and directives for how norms should be applied to who, when, and where:

Disciplinary normalization consists first of all in positing a model, an optimal model that is constructed in terms of a certain result, and the operation of disciplinary normalization consists in trying to get people, movements, and actions to conform to this model, the normal being precisely that which conforms to the norm, and the abnormal that which is incapable of conforming to the norm (Foucault 2007, 57).

Normalization is the normal or regular deployment of norms and it works as a kind of second-order norm to control the deployment of norms. For instance, Foucault offers the example of



penmanship as a norm ('one should learn to write') that is also normalized with particular methods and styles of writing. It is not enough that all children can write, they must all learn to write in the same manner, at the same time, and produce nearly identical script. Foucault details just how strict teachers can be in regards to the extensive 'normal' procedures for mobilizing a pencil on paper:

Good handwriting, for example, presupposes a gymnastics—a whole routine whose rigorous code invests the body in its entirety, from the points of the feet to the tip of the index finger (Foucault 1995, 152).

Many readers will still remember that not too long ago writing with one's left hand even if it strictly mirrored writing with the right hand and looked identical on paper was not acceptable; everyone had to have the norm imposed on them in the same normalized manner. All schoolchildren ideally produce identical writing via the same mechanics at matching ages. Although the example is in itself trivial, Foucault argues that we are part of a disciplinary society that treats most of the norms that guide subject formation with similarly controlling normalizing techniques:

In more general terms still, we can say that there is one element that will circulate between the disciplinary and the regulatory, which will also be applied to the body and population alike, which will make it possible to control both the disciplinary order of the body and the aleatory events that occur in the biological multiplicity. The element that circulates between the two is the norm. [...] To say that power took possession of life in the nineteenth century, or to say that power at least takes life under its care in the nineteenth century, is to say that it has, thanks to the play of technologies of discipline on the one hand and technologies of regulation on the other, succeeded in covering the whole surface that lies between the organic and the biological, between body and population (Foucault 2003, 252-253).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault's usage of the term normalization is almost immediately problematized in his work after it gains widespread attention in *Discipline and Punish*. In the above quote from *Society Must Be Defended* we see that he distinguishes normalization from regularization. Later, in *Security, Territory, and Population* he divides normalization up into normation and normalization/regularization—this time grouping normalization as identical with regularization (Foucault 2007, 63). The motivation for his breaking up the functions of power covered by the general term 'normalization' into multiple terms (normalization, normation, and regularization) in his later works is the desire to point out that normalization does not always occur in the same way, via the same means, or produce the same effects (Foucault 2003, 253; 2007, 56-57). From the point of view of this paper, what is important is that all of the functions of normalizing power utilize the norm to exercise social control that tended towards domination, a control that he wanted to combat via the aesthetics of existence.

We normalize reading, mathematics, finances, sex, sexuality, love, friendship, work, raising children, etc. Today we have norms and normalizing ways of applying them for an incredible amount of the tasks that we carry out. A society in which particular norms are required and individuals must apply those norms in ways they have no ability to modify qualifies as domination under Foucault's definition. Adopting particular norms without being able to modify them or having the latitude to choose alternate norms leaves little room to modify power relations.

As a result of this important distinction between norms and normalization in their effects on domination, it is perfectly consistent to argue that societies require some norms while also standing against normalization as a questionable and dominating employment of norms (Foucault 1996c, 434). So, while I agree with Hadot that Foucault's turn to antiquity was motivated by his perception of a contemporary need for a critically revised aesthetics of existence, I would not agree that its aim is Dandyism. The ancient version of the stylization of norms that Foucault called 'the aesthetics of existence' allowed Greco-Roman norms to be applied without causing domination because the individual had to choose, interpret, and stylize norms to suit their particular form of existence. This living aesthetics gives the subject the space to transform the relations of power and knowledge around them and participate in some measure of freedom. The aesthetics of existence puts the moment of stylization between the general category of the norm and the individual, precisely where normalizing mechanisms would operate to regulate the application of norms. Foucault's texts suggest a much more accurate and rich way to understand his deployment of aesthetics than as Hadot's Dandyism. Namely, Foucault's aesthetics of existence aims to mediate the dominations he had uncovered in contemporary society through offering an important alternative to the normalizing use of norms.

Why would Hadot think that Foucault tends to Dandyism, when the evidence does not seem to point that way?<sup>5</sup> No one, as far as I know, would assert that the Stoics, for all their aestheticism, are Dandies—quite the opposite in fact. So, to repeat: Why? One must remember that Hadot urges us towards the Universal and the accession to the Divine in order to “nourish” our spiritual lives. He is focused improving our spiritual lives by getting us to recognize and live in accordance with the Divine instead of the whimsy of “pleasure” (*voluptas*) (Hadot 1995c, 207). It is likely that he interprets Foucault’s aims according to the binary of the accession to the Universal versus the selfish and irrational pursuit of pleasure (*voluptas*). Foucault’s critique of normalization and his attack on universal or regular ways of applying norms might have seemed like an attack on the validity of the Universal as an end and a move towards hedonistic chaos. From Hadot’s perspective, Foucault’s aims would seem to be heading in the wrong direction—towards *voluptas* and away from the Universal. However, I think this would be to judge Foucault according to a binary set of standards that are foreign to his own work and whose importation could preclude an understanding of Foucault’s work on its own terms. Approaching Foucault’s work according to a binary of Universality and Dandyism would cause one to miss the strategic move Foucault makes through the imposition of a reductionist and alien binary.

In fact, Foucault’s move against contemporary normalization via an aesthetics of existence has direct critical relevance for Hadot’s philosophical perspective that Hadot misses precisely because he seems unwilling to see the context and purpose of the aesthetics of existence. Via his criticism of normalization, Foucault insists that the sort of singular Universal

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<sup>5</sup> This charge of Dandyism or its like occurs so often in print and in conversation that it seems suspicious in its ubiquity. I suspect that Foucault’s homosexuality and some of his interpreters’ homophobia might play a role in the prevalence of this idea, especially since his aesthetics of existence is developed out of a study of the history of sexuality that had a focus on homosexuality. In comparison, Marcuse, who also had a significant aesthetic dimension to his later philosophy, was never referred to as a Dandy as far as I am aware. In the case of Hadot, whatever his feelings about homosexuality, he has significant philosophical differences that can account for his charges of Dandyism that we will have to consider in detail here.

order that Hadot is striving for is precisely the problem in contemporary life. Foucault argues that we do not need *more* standardization to unite humanity on the singular plane of the Universal. Instead, we need to go in precisely the opposite direction because normalization is so extensive that it threatens a general state of domination that we must resist:

[P]hilosophy is that which calls into question domination at every level and in every form in which it exists, whether political, economic, sexual, institutional, etc. To a certain extent this critical function of philosophy derives from the Socratic injunction “Take care of yourself,” in other words, “Make freedom your foundation, through the mastery of yourself” (Foucault 1996c, 448-449).

For Foucault, philosophy as a way of life means taking care of oneself, part of which is being critical of the context in which one is embedded. Foucault’s fight against domination and his turn to the aesthetic instead of the Universal is part of his philosophical project of self-care: he aims to combat the domination in the present in order to open avenues for other ways of being.

## **Conclusion**

The different diagnoses of the political and ethical needs of the present are the point of these two philosophers departure and the source of their differing understandings of the role of the Universal and aesthetic in philosophy and life today. Foucault finds normalization to be rampant and resolutely crafts a philosophy that in no way harkens to the existence, validity, or need for the Universal while Hadot finds us lacking in direction and centers his philosophy on evoking the Universal to “nourish” his readers’ “spiritual lives.” Foucault privileges the aesthetic above the Universal while Hadot only leaves room for the aesthetic in his philosophy with regret as it marks the insurmountable Wittgensteinian space between him and God. Hadot’s gaze is so strictly and resolutely fixed on acceding to the Universal that the aesthetic moment in acceding to the Universal is only an unfortunate separation from that which he says we all “love.” For Foucault, the aesthetic is not an unfortunate chasm which we must to try accede

beyond by evoking what lies beyond it, the aesthetic is a primary resource for the subversion and displacement of normalization with practices of freedom.

This may be the point at which we should follow the wisdom Hadot does, and bow to Wittgenstein's advice and silence ourselves in the face of that which philosophy cannot capture (Hadot 2006, 28-29). The experience of the Universal that Hadot describes exceeds language and philosophy. One cannot argue about whether it is truly the experience of the Universal or not that creates the love and joy that Hadot describes; such experiences are beyond argument and logic by definition. The mystical claims that underlie and motivate Hadot's work cannot be defended logically but only experientially in the practice of the evocation of the Universal. Likewise, Foucault's deliberate attempts to create an aesthetic practice for the interpretation and application of norms is itself aesthetically motivated. More precisely, Foucault finds domination distasteful and he desires to create relations of power that are more open to transformation, to liberty. Foucault's philosophy, like Hadot's, operates in recognition of the impossibility of a final logical proof or justification for a way of life but they differ in their response to those limits that they confront in philosophy. Hadot seeks to use philosophy as a spring-board to that which is beyond philosophy, seeking the Universal because the limitations of the aesthetic keep him from what he loves. He finds in the evocation of the Universal the experience that can not be found within the boundaries of logic—the joy of love, order, and belonging to the Truth. In contrast, Foucault finds in the limits of philosophy an aesthetic zone of interpretation that has resisted attempts to bridge it. Foucault uses this aesthetics of existence to free us from the tyranny of the unchanging Truth of the Universal produced by normalization. In this aesthetic well of epistemological limitation and the necessary resort to taste, he lays a marker to summon us to the limitations of epistemological certitude, not to mark that lack as an original sin, but to

find in it a deep spring of our freedom and the possibility of change and amelioration. If the Truth cannot be finally known and the Universal cannot be secured, then there is freedom to create truths and a multiplicity of orders, leaving us with work to do and our own freedom to materialize.

The Universal and the aesthetic as Hadot and Foucault respectively approach them are at once permanently alien and necessary to philosophy. Neither the Universal nor the aesthetic are recuperable in the language of philosophy, both defy the entirety of their mapping in a logical analysis. However, these epistemological limitations, rather than paralyzing the practice of philosophy, are what calls philosophy to action in two distinctly different modes: Hadot pursues philosophy as the attempt to evoke the Universal while Foucault exploits an aesthetic *ethos* to free us from the tyranny of Truth.

Hadot reaches beyond philosophy because philosophy only makes sense to him when read as a part of living a life in accession to the Universal. Philosophy is a tool for Hadot and it is not an end in itself, it is an important part of living well insofar as it brings one into harmony with the Universal. Philosophy is thus tied to the Universal but forever joined at a remove because it cannot finally accede to the Universal; philosophy can only point the way to what it fails to fully capture. Many philosophers join Hadot in this attempt to provide a philosophy of the Universal or a philosophy in harmony with it. One has to assess whether the claims to an experience of the Universal that is beyond the bounds of logical validation should be assented to. If Foucault is right, then experimenting with this mode of reason might well contribute to the domination of a Universal norm.

In contrast to Hadot, Foucault embraces the aesthetic and the limited power of philosophical reason as ethically, politically, and philosophically libratory. Foucault focuses on

the aesthetic to displace the normalization that is occasioned and justified by discourses that claim true knowledge about how norms should be practiced and how lives should be led. He embraces the limits of philosophical reason and uses it as a positive force to create the space to refuse, modify, or create norms and not merely submit to the True and the Universal. However, if Hadot is right, then Foucault's push for widening the space of difference may be only to bring himself and others farther from the love and order of the Universal, making the equation "Saint = Foucault" very misguided indeed (Halperin 1997).

More than their differences, these two thinkers point out why the old battle of the Universal and the aesthetic has been so persistently irresolvable—the Universal and the aesthetic are not reducible to "exact and logic[al]" reason. Outside of the limits of logic the two have made a philosophical choice to fight from different terrains: Hadot enters the philosophical firmament in movement towards the Universal while Foucault engages philosophy to produce spaces of freedom in the present landscape of the domination through an aesthetics of existence. This battle cannot be decided by the referee many philosophers would wish for—the Truth—but it must be decided by "philosophical choice" instead. Whether one takes one path or another will depend on how swayed one is by Hadot's mysticism, Foucault's aesthetics, or another means of navigating through the limits of philosophy. And, strangely, this summation of their differences leads us back to their similarities where we began: philosophy for both of these thinkers is a way of life and just not a method of logical deduction. Philosophy involves the application of considered wisdom to a life in the attempt to make the best choices possible. Philosophy motivates the best resources of reason to a task that, however wise and considered one is, will still require a supplement to reason to complete. Regardless of their differences, both speak with a single voice on this point: consider the effects your choice will have on your life as

a whole, the effect on the larger world around you, and do not expect that logic or some other agent can flawlessly make this choice for you—it is not a matter of the True decision but the best available one. In other words, choose wisely!



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