Everything Depends on Us: Alternative Exercises for a Profoundly Interdependent World

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In "Philosophy as a Way of Life," John Mullen and Jeremy Alexander call attention to what the doing of philosophy does to us, the formative nature of philosophical thinking and speaking and, especially, thinking and speaking *together*.[1] I appreciate their focus on democracy and sustainability not as curricular content or objects of study, but as requiring *exercises* in speaking politically and living sustainably. Significant about the concept of exercise is that it is a repeated activity that builds a practice and involves the whole person—body, mind, and spirit.

Following Pierre Hadot, the authors write that philosophical dialogue, understood as a spiritual exercise and not merely an intellectual sparring game, puts us into question, and this experience of being put into question forces us to "give attention" to ourselves. Such attention to ourselves, the authors argue, enables us to become aware of being a part of a larger whole, both in the sense of the democratic polity and in the sense of planetary ecological systems.

In this response, I will call attention to the specific nature of the attention Hadot is referring to, and argue that it is, at best, insufficient for and, at worst, harmful to especially the ecological concerns the authors discuss. In other words, while I do not disagree that, in the context of the current crises of multiple planetary systems, it can be a salutary exercise to be called into question and to attend anew to who one is and is becoming, the kind of attention we pay should not be the Stoic *prosoche* that Mullen and Alexander propose. In its stead, we should cultivate other, more relational and interdependent kinds of attention.

PROSOCHE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Mullen and Alexander propose that we should have and live by a rule of life. They write: "Essentially, the rule of life is a code of conduct, emphasizing the development of an inner wisdom to lead one through the complexities,

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uncertainties, and challenges of existence. An important component in this practice is attending to one's attention." They then quote Hadot: "Attention (*prosoche*) allows us to respond immediately to events, as if they were questions asked of us all of a sudden. In order for this to be possible, we must always have the fundamental principles 'at hand' (*procheiron*)."

However, Mullen and Alexander omit the important further explanation that Hadot provides about the nature and purpose of *prosoche*. I quote from Hadot: "Thanks to his spiritual vigilance [that is, *prosoche*], the Stoic always has 'at hand' (*procheiron*) the fundamental rule of life: that is, the distinction between what depends on us and what does not."[2] It is this distinction between what depends on us and what does not that troubles me. Hadot continues:

> Attention to the present moment is, in a sense, the key to spiritual exercises. It frees us from the passions, which are always caused by the past or the future—two areas which do *not* depend on us … As we can see, the exercise of meditation is an attempt to control inner discourse, in an effort to render it coherent. The goal is to arrange it around a simple, universal principle: the distinction between what does and does not depend on us, between freedom and nature.[3]

Elsewhere, Hadot explains the distinction between dependence and independence that informs the spiritual exercise of *prosoche* that Mullen and Alexander advocate. He explains that:

> One of the Stoics' most fundamental attitudes [is] the delimitation of our own sphere of liberty as an impregnable islet of autonomy, in the midst of the vast river of events and of Destiny. What depends on us are thus the acts of our soul, because we can freely choose them …. By contrast, that which does not depend on us … is everything that depends upon the general course of nature.[4]

Hadot's explanation clarifies that the claim that the future does not depend on us can only be understood as a claim that we, as individuals, cannot *control* the

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future, and that worrying or caring about the future is likely to produce greater suffering for the human self because it interferes with the inner freedom it seeks to achieve.

Unfortunately, it has become abundantly and painfully clear that the future does depend on us collectively and thus, in part, on me individually. Where the Stoics held the course of nature to be independent of the human sphere of liberty, history has shown that there is no such independence, only a profound entanglement. Where the Stoics held the course of nature to be the course of Destiny, we now know that increases in carbon dioxide and methane emissions, biodiversity loss, plastic pollution, and the other transgressions of planetary boundaries that have made our planetary systems unstable and our lives deeply unsustainable are very much the results of human actions.[5]

My concern, therefore, is that an understanding of the future as not being under my control and thus not being within the scope of what I should attend to fosters precisely the disconnected and self-serving thinking we see today. We may not have come to terms with it yet, but we know that there is no distinction between (human) freedom and nature, only an entanglement in which humans have claimed freedom at the expense of nature, and in which the natural consequences of that exploitation are now encroaching upon that freedom. There never was any independence, only profound interdependence, and acting as if human freedom required independence from natural processes it could not control has produced bodies, minds, and spirits that are deeply oblivious to the planetary systems of which we have never not been a part.

ALTERNATIVE EXERCISES

This does not mean that there is no value in the exercise of—meditatively or otherwise—focusing my attention on what I can control and thus reducing my personal suffering. The value of such an exercise is as a temporary rest and respite that enables me to return to the experience of interdependence and the awareness of responsibility that comes with it. What I mean is that, for most of us, living in a constant awareness of the state of the planet and our failings to mitigate its worsening condition is simply too much to bear. When

we become overwhelmed, we risk becoming paralyzed and retreating from the responsibilities that face us. *Prosoche* is an insulation against the suffering we experience, or should experience, when we attend to how much has been and continues to be destroyed in our name, for our benefit. Spiritual exercises are beneficial if they help us withstand such suffering, and enable us to keep going with the political, cultural, agricultural, and so on, work required to mitigate the destruction; they should not, however, be a way to shield us permanently from it.

In addition, reflecting regularly on what one believes or claims is one's rule of life and the extent to which one honestly lives by or falls short of it, seems to me a sensible practice that illustrates how philosophy can be a way of life and not merely a commentary on it. For example, I know someone who works hard to live in accordance with the maxim, "make more life, not less." That is, she seeks out life-giving activities (such as growing vegetables or feeding her animals) and, as much as possible, avoids those that destroy it (such as driving a car or using pesticides). Every decision requires a reflection on immediate and more distant consequences, and frequently confronts her with contradictions and tensions in upholding the maxim.

So, what kind of exercise might be more helpful, if it is not a vigilance to the distinction between what depends on us and what does not? Unsurprisingly, it is a vigilance to the impossibility of this distinction, the profound interdependence of all beings, and the uncomfortable awareness that everything depends on us, even though we cannot control it. This is the kind of exercise Robin Wall Kimmerer proposes, and the authors refer to at the end of their paper. Kimmerer speaks of digging wild leeks, picking sweetgrass, and harvesting a black ash, attending always to how much the land can or cannot afford to give that year.[6] It is an exercise that leaves *prosoche* behind and, instead, stresses the deep entanglement of human and other-than-human life and the impossibility of distinguishing what does and does not depend on us. Especially insofar as such an exercise involves our material interdependence with the world, a sensory exercise that reminds us of our physical dependence on water, soil, and plant life and not, as Hadot suggests, "a purely rational, imaginative, or intuitive exercise," it can build a practice of living sustainably.[7]

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REFERENCES

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3 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 85.

4 Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 83.

5 Katherine Richardson et al., "Earth Beyond Six of Nine Planetary Boundaries," *Science Advances* 9, no. 37 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adh2458

6 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

7 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 59.